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THE WAY OF LIFE

VOL. I

The Parables of Jesus

THE WAY OF LIFE

NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES
VOL. I
THE PARABLES OF JESUS

BY
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PREFACE

Ἐγὼ ἐν μέσῳ ὑμῶν εἰμι ὡς ὁ διακονῶν.

A lowly figure, fainting on a cross,
'Mid youth's high purpose doomed to torturing death,
In servile form, life sunk in pain and loss,
Despised and lonely, yielding up its breath.

A radiant form, clad in celestial light—
Transfiguring beam of kindling truth and grace—
Enthroned in splendour on the mountain height;
God's glory seen in that uplifted face.

Strange alchemy of love! These two are one;
And he who stood condemned, a seeming slave,
Was glorified as God's beloved Son
When, saving foes, himself he would not save.

O Love, supreme above the selfish world,
And pure as sunlight on the morning hills,
Come, with God's holy flag of peace unfurled,
With healing grace subdue our wayward wills.

Divinest art thou when, in lowly guise,
Thou kneelest down to wash our pilgrim feet,
And teachest blinded souls, made truly wise,
How God-given greatness takes the humblest seat.

Servant and Lord of waiting souls, oh, come;
To weary, heavy-laden hearts give rest.
Let not thy holy word within be dumb,
But speak, and guide us in our heavenly quest.

Then we shall love; we too shall inly feel
Greatest are those who lowliest service give.
We heavenward rise while we adoring kneel;
Who truly loves, alone doth truly live.

JAMES DRUMMOND.

Oxford, *October*, 1917.

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Ἐγώ εἰμι ἡ ὁδὸς καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια καὶ ἡ ζωή.

Ὁ λόγος ὃν ἀκούετε οὐκ ἔστιν ἐμὸς ἀλλὰ τοῦ πέμψαντός με πατρός.

Οὐ πᾶς ὁ λέγων μοι κύριε, κύριε, εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν, ἀλλ' ὁ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ πατρός μου.

Chapter I

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Matthew xiii. 3-9, 19-23; *Mark* iv. 3-8, 14-20; *Luke* viii. 5-8, 12-15.

THE Parable of the Sower presents no less faithful a picture of the human heart now than in the days when it was first uttered. It appeals as strongly to us as to the multitude who assembled on the shores of the Galilean Lake. It portrays our dangers and our needs, and speaks to us with a voice of solemn warning. Like all the parables of Christ it expresses profound truths in few and simple words. To those indeed who are wholly unspiritual and unprepared the words may suggest nothing but the natural scene which they describe; and to a people whose 'hearts had waxed gross' they could not reveal 'the mysteries of the kingdom of God.' But they are easily borne in the memory, and, as the mind becomes more humble and the experience of life deepens, come home with greater fullness of meaning and ever increasing power.

Before we proceed to the explanation of the parable it may be useful to glance at the scenery amid which it was uttered.

Rural imagery is not that which we should naturally employ in addressing the inhabitants of a great city, and consequently dwellers in cities may fail to apprehend one of the most striking effects of the parable. The objects referred to were all familiar to the people, and every little detail belonged to their ordinary life. One of the great uses of the parabolic style of teaching is that by drawing a parallel between the world of nature and the world of spirit it fixes holy associations upon our everyday pursuits, and so converts the dull routine of business or the gay round of pleasure into means of spiritual improvement.

Our lives are influenced, probably far more than we suspect, by association. The idea which has once blended itself with an outward object refuses to be separated from it, and the presence of that object henceforward affects us for evil or for good. A simple tune may awaken ancient memories, and revive the feelings and aspirations of younger days. A cheerful fireplace may bring back a circle of happy faces, laughing at some innocent enjoyment, till we wish that we were as pure as in the years that are fled. Even a chair of peculiar shape may remind us of a little room where long, long ago we learned to pray, and thank a kind Father for his mercies. And even the covers of a book, the words of which have brought new life to our souls, will rebuke our faithless deeds and bear witness to divine things.

Might we not make much more use than we do of this power of association, and convert the dull

wood and stone around us into ministering angels to feed our highest life? To Jesus the objects amid which he lived spoke of the profoundest truths, and common things, from which others would scorn to learn, shone for him with divine significance. The city conspicuous far and wide on account of its elevated position, the candle carefully placed so as to diffuse the most light, the beautiful flowers and the happy birds, the husbandman scattering his seed or gathering in the harvest, the woman making a loaf, the fisherman drawing his net, the shepherd searching for a stray sheep, the great tree growing by degrees from the little seed—all these suggested topics for earnest thought and feeling, and, we may suppose without irreverence, were far more to him than mere illustrations which he employed for the benefit of others.

They were influences which helped to mould his own spirit, and to strengthen him in fulfilling his great purposes; for we must remember that these were the objects amid which he grew up. His parables were not, as many of them might be to us, far-fetched illustrations, but may have been often suggested by what was actually passing before his eyes; and those who heard and understood must ever after have found a new meaning in their pastoral or agricultural occupations, and the seed which formerly awakened only thoughts of a wheat harvest would now touch a deeper chord, and create longings for a divine and inward growth.

These remarks are illuminated by the parable before us. It was spoken beside the shores of a lake bordered by fertile hills, which, as they sank into the water, left a sandy beach whereon the

multitude assembled. Jesus, to escape the pressure, sat in a boat. Over the heads of the crowd he could see the cultivated fields. Perhaps at that very moment a sower was engaged in his labour.

An interesting passage from Stanley's 'Sinai and Palestine,' where he is describing the shores of the Lake of Galilee, brings the scene vividly before us. 'A slight recess in the hillside, close upon the plain, disclosed at once, in detail, and with a conjunction which I remember nowhere else in Palestine, every feature of the great parable. There was the undulating cornfield descending to the water's edge. There was the trodden pathway running through the midst of it, with no fence or hedge to prevent the seed falling here and there on either side of it, or upon it—itself hard with the constant tramp of horse and mule and human feet. There was the good rich soil, which distinguishes the whole of that plain and its neighbourhood from the bare hills elsewhere, descending into the lake, and which, where there is no interruption, produces one vast mass of corn. There was the rocky ground of the hillside, protruding here and there through the cornfields, as elsewhere through the grassy slopes. There were the large bushes of thorn . . . springing up, like the fruit-trees of the more inland parts, in the very midst of the waving wheat.'

We see, then, that the parable related to matters which were quite familiar to the listening crowd, and thus tended to connect sublime and elevating thoughts with one of the most common occupations. Upon these thoughts we may now proceed to reflect.

We must address ourselves first to the leading

terms of the parable, the sower, the seed, and the ground.

In the interpretation which is given in the Gospels nothing is said of the sower. To whom did Jesus refer? One opinion is that he intended himself. At the very moment of utterance he was engaged in sowing, scattering his great truths among men of all sorts; and certainly to him preeminently among men the title might be given. But if we are to limit the term to any one being, we must refer it to God. As Jesus said elsewhere, 'My Father is the husbandman.' He is the original source of all truth, the great planter of the best thoughts and feelings in the human heart. Whatever good seed may be sown within us, to him our gratitude is ultimately due. But we must not forget that countless intermediate agents are employed in diffusing goodness and truth over the world and to them, in a lower degree, the title 'sower' may be applied. They are the labourers whom God sends forth to scatter his seed. I am disposed to think that this indefiniteness affords the reason why Christ did not explain whom he denoted by the sower. All may be so called who exert a healthy influence upon their fellow men, all in whom the word of God abides, and who spread that word by their speech or by their life. This may suggest to us some serious thought.

In this high sense ought not all men to be engaged in sowing? Are we not all, whether we desire it or not, planting seeds of good or evil, adding to the virtue or the sin of the world? We should not be so careless if we remembered that our conduct helps to elevate or depress some other

soul besides our own. Every sin, even the most secret, is an injury to our neighbour; for it destroys so much wealth of heart which ought to have been given to increase the great spiritual harvest. We are anxious to throw off this responsibility. We would delegate our labour to a salaried profession of sowers, and think that all is well. But all is not well. What is called preaching the word is a small, perhaps a very small, part of the spiritual influences at work in society; and every Christian man ought so to live as to scatter some fruitful seed around his path. We are all so bound to one another that we cannot escape on the plea that we are not our brothers' keepers. We know not how deeply a holy life may move a brother's heart, or how destructively our low principles and selfish conduct may sap a brother's religious strength.

The seed, we are told, represents 'the word of God.' We must be careful not to be led astray by this expression. It has so long been customary to call the Scriptures 'the word of God' that, when we hear the phrase, we are apt to think of the Bible, and of nothing else. It never has that meaning within the Bible itself. Here the expression corresponds most nearly with what we designate as spiritual truth. The everlasting laws of right and wrong written upon the human heart; the authoritative voice of rebuke which makes itself heard amid the uproar of passion and sin; the 'well done' breathed in the soul when it has preferred duty to self-interest; the consciousness which will not leave us, of some higher Presence mingling in the affairs of men; the solemn feeling that we have been born for an immortal destiny,

the glory or the shame of which must be determined by character alone—these, recognized with various degrees of clearness, are the word of God. And though we are slow to believe it, they are truly described; for they are what the Spirit speaks to the human soul, and are God's revelation of himself to the universal heart of man. They are, too, well represented under the figure of a seed; for they are the germs from which our characters expand, the elementary convictions without which we could have no religious characters at all.

But we may include under the same term every lofty conception, every pure emotion, every honourable aim, whether arising spontaneously in our minds, planted there by the Father of spirits, or coming to us through the medium of some human soul more exalted than our own. The good impressions which we receive from the patience, the fervour, the self-sacrifice of another; the sacred feelings moved by hearing the words of deep conviction; the faith implanted by the clear thought and glowing earnestness of one nearer to God than ourselves; the shame and penitence engendered by the presence of superior holiness; the strong purpose of amendment springing from the rebuke of one to whom conscience is more than a name—all these may be comprehended in 'the word of God,' and become the seeds of a fairer life.

The last term requiring notice is the ground. This we may describe generally as the human heart. It is that within us which is susceptible of good or evil impressions, which may be quick or dull in apprehending religious truth, persevering or inconstant, earnest or frivolous. This is too clear to demand further explanation.

There is, however, in regard to the seed and the ground, a curious and interesting point in the interpretation said to have been given by Christ. The relation between them is expressed thus: 'This is he that was sown by the way-side'; 'He that was sown upon the rocky places'; 'He that was sown among the thorns'; 'He that was sown upon the good ground.'[1] According to this explanation men seem to be represented, not by the ground, but by the seed; and yet Christ begins by saying, 'The seed is the word of God.' This apparent confusion may have been due to inadvertence; but it is suggestive of a deep truth. The perfect human being is formed only by the union of the will which is his own and the Divine Word which is not his own. Where there is no germ of spiritual life, man is hardly elevated above the brute, and manifests few of the distinctive characteristics of humanity.

In this state he truly corresponds with the dull earth, the soil which is capable of nourishing a seed, but without that seed must remain for ever unproductive. So also spiritual truth planted nowhere, but simply garnered up for future use, answers to the seed which still lies fruitless in the storehouse. The two must be brought into contact, the susceptible nature must receive the germinating truth, before the grandest elements of human character begin to unfold themselves, and display the bloom of pure affection, and the fruit of holy deeds. It is the union of the human will and the Divine Spirit which gives birth to the perfect man; and it is only in proportion as that

[1] So in *Matthew*. *Mark* and *Luke* have the same meaning.

union has taken place that we are men in the highest sense. In Jesus this union was so clearly manifested as to constitute a revelation, the intense energy of the will being displayed in that self-surrender which is the condition of the purest spiritual gifts. Him, therefore, we regard as the perfect man; and we feel that other men approach perfection in proportion as the Divine Word dwells within them, and becomes the guide of their rude forces and susceptibilities. We can understand, then, that what 'was sown upon the good ground,' the seed, that is, in union with the soil, and growing into a plant, is he that 'beareth fruit.' It is the word of God which appropriates the finest elements of our untutored nature, and so grows into the attributes which we most delight to honour with the name of human.

We must now enter into the details of the parable, and reflect on the several characters described in it. It divides itself into two parts; the first relating to the causes of unfruitfulness, which are classed under three heads; the second referring to the good soil, with its various degrees of productiveness.

The first character introduced to our notice is that which is entirely unsusceptible. The seed which falls upon the roadside not only disappoints the wishes of the husbandman, but does not even attempt a sickly and unfruitful growth. It simply lies there till it is trodden down by the foot of the passer-by, or picked up by the hungry bird. This, we are told, symbolizes those who hear, and as Matthew adds, 'understand not'; from whose hearts, in consequence, the evil one[1] snatches away

[1] *So Matthew,* ὁ πονηρός; *Mark,* ὁ σατανᾶς; *Luke,* ὁ διάβολος.

the word, lest they should believe and be saved. This language describes in the manner natural to the time the total disappearance of better thoughts from the mind. They melt away, we know not how. Evil and impure conceptions rise in their place without any voluntary effort on our part. And this fitful coming and going of our thoughts, this dreamlike mingling of grotesque and often bad images with our most serious moods, resembles the action of an evil spirit who takes away the good impressions and thrusts in the bad.

Those are most exposed to this unseen and apparently causeless destruction of their higher sentiments to whom religion is merely an outward concern, and in whose hearts it has never struck a living root. The way-side does not represent necessarily the coarse and hard-hearted, but simply those whose religion lies upon the surface, and whose worship, if they engage in it at all, is only an act of cold propriety. If we would not resemble the road worn so hard by the world's traffic as to be unsusceptible of any softening influence, we must reserve at least some moments every day for private thought and prayer, and we must bring our minds into an attitude of reverence for the solemn duties of our weekly services, and seek to open our spirits to every holy word which it may please God to entrust to their keeping.

In opposition to this class of character we have another, which, far from being hard and unsusceptible, is exceedingly sensitive to good impressions, but lacks the endurance which is necessary to render it fruitful. Some seed, we are told, fell upon rocky places, where they had not much earth. The image is not that of a bare rock, where

no growth would be possible, nor yet of a deep soil clogged with stones, for the roots would find their way down through the crevices, and so receive abundant nourishment; but that of a surface of rock overspread with a thin layer of earth. In such a situation the seed would speedily germinate, but, as it could not send its roots down into moist ground, would soon be parched by the heat of the sun. Thus is represented a character tremulously alive to outward impressions. The kindly emotions are easily awakened. The sympathetic tear glistens at every tale of suffering, and the sight of distress calls into action an impulsive generosity. Spiritual relations are discerned with clearness and rapidity; and the glory of a Christlike life shines in rainbow colours. His gospel is received with joy. Earth becomes a heaven, and the soul loses itself in a delicious dream. But how seldom do we find this mobility of nature combined with depth of principle. In itself it is beautiful and winning; and if it could be thrown as a light and graceful garment around the solid form of religious faith and obedience, it would be no small advantage to the character. This openness to spiritual impression might be enlisted on the side of religion, and prove of incalculable service in pressing it on the attention of others. It is well that the loveliness and charm of Christianity should be set forth no less than its duties and its cross. But this emotional temperament may be miserably shallow. The sentimental tear may pass itself off as benevolence. The beating heart, while the death of the martyr is described by some skilled narrator, may induce us to think that we have the martyr spirit, though at the very moment we may be neglecting a

troublesome duty in order to gratify our self-laudatory feelings.

It is much pleasanter and more exciting to be burned in imagination and have our names handed down to a fictitious posterity as true servants of God, than to perform some homely service for which neither posterity nor friends will thank us. So, too, the subdued face and entrancing lull of devotion may be construed into loyalty to God, whereas they are only the revealers of his will and his fatherly appeal to our allegiance; and as soon as the will is made known, and the sweetness of the appeal is past, we go sorrowfully away. In a mind of this description religion may have a rapid growth; but it withers as rapidly. As long as it is one continuous flow of joy, as long as faith has not to wrestle with the doubt of a surrounding world, and devotion has not to kneel alone amid hard and wearing duties, all is well. But let the fires of persecution be kindled, let it be needful for the man to utter his inmost faith in presence of unbelief and scorn, let him be required to confront the false maxims of his associates with the dictates of conscience, or let him be called to put his hand to a difficult and perilous duty, and by and by he will be offended. It was not to bear a cross that he followed Christ, but to sit at his right hand in his kingdom. The loveliness of religion is dissolved, and its crown of gold is become a crown of thorns. As, before, its glory filled the imagination, so now its darkness and its pain. It has no form nor comeliness; and when we behold it, there is no beauty that we should desire it. It is despised and rejected of men. And who knows not that the common sense of mankind, especially of the

cultured and enlightened, is the ultimate criterion of Divine truth, and must supersede the verdicts of the individual conscience? And thus this emotional being, who gave such fair promise, and had been entrusted with such precious gifts, 'in time of temptation falls away.'

We come now to a third cause of unfruitfulness. 'Some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it.' In this case there is abundance of good soil, which, if its undivided powers were devoted to the corn, might produce a rich harvest. But the ground has not been carefully cleared. There are noxious roots in it which demand a portion of its fertility; and these springing up in conjunction with the corn render it unfruitful. Thus are described 'those who, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches (or, as in Matthew, "deceitfulness of riches") and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection.' In such men the cause of failure is not to be found in a hard insensibility, or in a shallow excitement which is incapable of endurance. They receive the word into good soil, into hearts which may be both tender and deep. But their energies are divided. Roots of evil are retained within, which acquire a disproportionate growth, and gradually choke the word. A reservation is made on behalf of some loved propensity; and desires inconsistent with pure religion are suffered to lurk, till the influences of the world bring them to maturity. These should be carefully eradicated, so that the world's clouds and sunshine should not nurture their thorny luxuriance, but foster that plant alone which the heavenly Father has planted.

Generally speaking, the hostile influences of the world may be considered under two heads, its cares and its pleasures. Its hard drudgery and routine distract the mind and exhaust its energies, till there seems to be no room for religion. Life is often one round of petty pursuits, all necessary, but apparently tending to no worthy end. The great faculties of the human soul are frittered away in subservience to mere animal wants; and one wonders what is signified by all this toil and trouble. How many will feel at the last day that the Divine Word within them was choked by the cares of this fleeting life. Yet, as I said, these cares are necessary. It is not in strictness these that work our ruin, but the attitude of our mind in regard to them. What if the daily round of duty, instead of wearing down the mind and choking the growth of higher thoughts, awaken our thankfulness and trust, and become the means of preparing us for a holier sphere. The soul of Jesus expanded amid the world's cares. For him no miraculous command converted stones into bread; yet his very hunger brought to his spirit that bread of life which others knew not of. And the woman of Samaria, while with heavy heart she performed her daily task, found at last a well of living water to quench that inner thirst which she had striven in vain to allay at earthly cisterns. So, in each of us, the hard and fatiguing concerns of this life need not produce only thorny anxieties, but may nourish the fairest fruits of the Spirit.

No less dangerous are the world's pleasures, which beguile and deceive us by imparting a false sense of satisfaction. When our outward wants are abundantly supplied, we are apt to forget that

deeper want which is not dependent on external resources. And thus our concern for religion is gradually stifled, while the refinements of wealth and taste engross too large a share of our affection. When we begin our career we may be superior to the snares of prosperity; but in the course of time the variety of interests which are brought before us, and the ample means of self-gratification at our command distract our attention; and though we believe that we are still true to our spiritual faith, a lower world is competing for our regards, and we take the side of God with only half our hearts. We no longer grow, as man ought to grow, living on an inspiration ever fresh, increasing in the likeness of our Maker as the seasons come and go, and bearing every year richer fruit. Alas! no. Thorns are slowly choking up the soul, and we sigh in vain for the faith of earlier days.

Thus is described what is perhaps the most frequent source of failure. Few men are wholly irreligious. No considerable number are basely false to their convictions, and deny their faith because its path is not strewn with flowers. But multitudes are only half religious, lifting their right hand to God, and stretching out their left to mammon. Their earnestness is distracted, and weakened by flowing in a variety of channels. The world is bringing them under bondage to things of no enduring worth; and though they may bear fruit, it is a meagre contribution to the great spiritual harvest.

We must now turn to contemplate the three characteristics which are essential to the truly religious life.

The first requisite is 'an honest and good heart.'

The word here translated 'honest' properly refers to beauty of character, and has no special allusion to sincerity, though this would undoubtedly be included as fundamental in all goodness. The two epithets are familiar in Greek usage, and are here confined to the Gospel of Luke, who was a Greek. A good heart is, on our side, the prime condition of religious growth. But it may be asked, if the heart be already good, what further is needed? Does not a good heart comprise within itself all religious excellence? Taking the word in its highest sense, it certainly does; but we must interpret it in contrast with the causes of unfruitfulness. The good heart is opposed to that kind of insensibility which is symbolized by the hard road. It is not so encrusted that the Divine Word cannot enter. It is conscious of its deficiencies, its weakness, its darkness, its inability to do the noblest things without the aid of the supreme wisdom and power. It says 'I can of mine own self do nothing'; the light of truth is not mine, but the Father's; 'I seek not my own will, but the will of him that sent me.'

Thus the good heart represents that lowliness of mind which Christ always inculcated as the one spirit without which none could enter his kingdom. Without the humble willingness to receive Divine instruction, we must remain for ever 'of the earth, earthy.' And this spirit of lowliness should attend us always. We must not suppose that we reach a high standard of religion in an instant, and, having learned a few truths, have no further need of the reverent and listening heart. We may be self-willed in our religious as in other work; and so much of the pious labour of the world is marred

with imperfections because those who perform it are seeking their own will, and not the will of him who sent them. They are sincerely desirous to serve God, but forget that he alone can direct them in that service. And so men learn to think that they are doing God's will when they persecute his saints and prophets, and sing their profane hallelujahs over the blood of his martyrs, or with empty self-conceit press their superficial crudities on older and wiser people. It is strange and saddening, the blindness of the good, the errors into which men perpetually fall because they wait not for a higher voice to speak. He only is secure who, conscious of his own darkness, looks ever with surrendered heart for the Divine light.

The second requisite of the religious life is, that having heard the word we 'keep it.' We must, by a voluntary effort, retain within our thoughts the truths which have for an instant stirred our hearts; and when the excitement is over, we must be careful that our feelings do not die, but simply transfigure themselves into the permanent form of principle. A temperament occasionally devout, an eye which now and then darts a prophetic glance into the invisible world, are not sufficient. Unless we preserve within the memory, and ponder in our minds, the visions of our sublimest moments, they will bless us no more than flitting phantoms, delighting the imagination with an unsubstantial splendour. To lowliness of mind, then, must be added force of will, a determination to 'hold fast that which is good.'

Lastly, we must 'bring forth fruit with patience.' We must not only receive the word with meekness, and retain it in our hearts till it becomes an abiding

principle, but we must apply it with persevering assiduity to our active life. Our religion may be much more than an emotion, and may even acquire sufficient strength to bear fruit, and yet, through want of an enduring faithfulness, gradually lose its freshness and vitality. Moral fidelity, then, leading us to persist, so long as duty requires, in every good work we undertake, must be added to our other attainments. Nothing is more common than to see men with sufficient religious principle to prevent them from sinking below a certain level of morality, but not sufficient to impel them to engage in any holy labour, to induce them to fulfil as in the sight of God whatever duties they assume, or to regard their worldly business as a sacred trust committed to them by the Divine Ruler. Religion is often viewed as a restraining rather than a fruit-bearing power, a controlling authority without rather than a moving force within. Men consider their mode of life their own concern so long as they do not affront the plain laws of morality. Secular and religious pursuits are regarded as two separate interests, requiring simply to be so adjusted in relation to each other as never to come into violent collision. Business is the arena of licensed self-seeking, not the field whereon to work out the Divine economy.

It must be admitted that religious teachers have done much to encourage this mistake. They often speak, for instance, of God requiring us to devote one day to him, as if the other six were the legitimate period of our self-will. They advocate the dedication of a tenth part of our income to God, as if a truly Christian man would not dedicate the whole. To spend money judiciously, to refrain

from waste and from idle and ambitious display, to meet your engagements honourably and promptly, to take care that those who are naturally dependent on you shall never, through any neglect of yours, become dependent on the charity of others—these, just as much as charitable gifts, result from the dedication of your income; and if these were religiously attended to by the great mass of society, nothing approaching to a tenth part would be required for that special purpose which is popularly regarded as the only way of spending money for the glory of God. The benevolence of to-day is drained to repair the ill-consequences of the folly and wickedness of past generations; and so it will ever be till men learn to produce a perfect fruit, and dedicate themselves and their property, not partially, but wholly. In the same way, he who neglects his business, and does not faithfully discharge in his dealings with his fellow men the duties to which God appointed him disobeys the Divine will just as much as he who forgets to lend a seventh part of his time to him who owns it all. God must be the sovereign of the whole life. Our business and our pleasures, our gaining and our spending, no less than our charity and our worship, ought to be the perfect and blessed fruits of the Spirit.

The fruitlessness of men is due not so much to violations of universally acknowledged duties as to breaches of those finer obligations which are peculiar to each man, to broken determinations, to schemes of improvement impatiently abandoned. There are solemn resolutions, contracts between the soul and God which no human eye has seen; and these we carelessly transgress. We forget that

the vow which we breathe in the lonely chamber is as binding as the promise which we make to our fellow man. We forget how awful is the secret prayer, that sublimest act of life, when the human and Divine spirits meet one another alone. When such moments determine our lasting character, and we prove that the seed of eternal life is deeply implanted, by the earnest self-devotion with which we do the will of him who planted it, we shall be in the number of those 'who in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.'

Chapter II

THE PARABLE OF THE TARES

Matthew xiii. 24-30, 37-43.

THE Parable of the Tares has been made a theme for controversy by rival sects; and as my own differs from the usual interpretation, it is necessary to allude, however briefly, to this controversy. The parable has been used to establish the guilt of schism, and to show, in the words of Archbishop Trench, 'the vanity of every attempt to found a church on a subjective instead of an objective basis, on the personal holiness of the members instead of recognizing one there to be founded for us, where the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments administered, by those duly commissioned to these offices'—a description which, according to the bias of the writer, may be intended to denote the Roman Catholic Church or the Church of England as by law established. Only spiritual pride, it is said, only the self-satisfaction which causes men to fancy themselves pure wheat, while all others are tares, can induce them to occupy a dissenting position; and the parable expressly forbids us to draw such distinctions, and separate ourselves

from the true church on the ground that it is overrun with weeds.

In order to extract this conclusion from the parable it is necessary to assume that the field is not, as Christ says, the world, but the Church. This is said to be proved by the fact that the parable 'is concerning the kingdom of heaven, or the Church,' and 'it required no special teaching to acquaint the disciples that *in the world* there would ever be a mixture of good and bad. And, moreover, the field *was* the world, and therefore was rightly called so, till the seed was sown in it; but thenceforth was the world no longer.' This is 'evident to every one not warped by a previous dogmatic interest.' It follows, then, that the Church is always to contain bad as well as good, that we must not presume to distinguish between them, and that he is guilty of spiritual pride who, on account of any abuses or errors, dissents from an institution which arrogates to itself the proud title of the only true Church of Christ.

Such was the teaching of an Archbishop of the established Church of England. But that Church itself falls under a similar stigma at the hands of a Church which has far wider claims than a Church established by the law of a single people. In 1896 the whole Protestant movement was condemned by his Holiness the Pope, in gentle tones indeed, but in words of uncompromising firmness. We are told that the Church 'regarded as rebels, and expelled from the ranks of her children, all who held beliefs on any point of doctrine different from her own,' and that 'those who denied that the authority of governing was limited to certain chosen persons were schismatics,' and that 'bishops

are deprived of the right and power of ruling, if they deliberately secede from Peter and his successors.' According, then, to the highest authority in Christendom the Church of England is guilty of heresy and schism; and it is not easy to see how the conclusion is to be avoided by those who accept the principles on which it is founded. It will be well if such conflicts between important churches awaken us to a larger charity, and produce in us a deeper appreciation of the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom.

The parable of the tares, however, does not decide between the claims of rival churches. Our pride will be judged by a far other test in the courts of heaven. To me the parable seems to contain a lesson strangely the reverse of all this. We may pass by the minor details and the warm eastern colouring, which do not appear to require special notice, and fix our attention upon the leading idea. Let us forget for the present such institutions as churches, which are not once mentioned in the explanation of the parable, and endeavour to grasp some principle which may serve to guide our thoughts and our actions.

It may assist us to understand the parable if we refer briefly to some of the questions which agitated men's minds in the time of Christ.

There are several parables in which Jesus instructs his disciples about the nature of the kingdom of heaven. Men's conceptions of a heavenly kingdom will vary according to the degree of their enlightenment. It cannot be rigidly defined, so that all shall understand by it precisely the same thing; but our ideal of it will grow indefinitely as our mental and spiritual

culture is improved. To some it will be a sensuous paradise; to others it will imply the triumph of goodness. To some it will be an outward realm into which men can enter by a change of place; to others it will be a condition of the soul, to be won by an inward sanctification. Whatever we consider best and most to be desired, that is for us the kingdom of heaven.

Numerous interesting questions, then, may have been raised in the minds of the disciples concerning the nature of the promised kingdom. Who were to be admitted to it? Was it to be confined to Jews, or extended to Gentiles? Were its head-quarters to be at Jerusalem, and all its true subjects to live in Palestine? Was it to come with sudden and overpowering splendour, or to be of gradual and silent growth? Were any profane persons to come within its limits, or were the chosen people to conquer all the enemies of God, and to live within their own precincts, a righteous and happy race in the midst of a wicked and miserable world? Some of these questions may appear to us childish. But to a Jew who believed that his own nation had a monopoly of Divine favour, they must have possessed an absorbing interest. Christ's views on the subject must have seemed startlingly novel; and when we remember how tenaciously men cling to their religious prejudices, we need not wonder that the cry of infidel and blasphemer was sedulously raised by the ecclesiastical authorities. Our modern controversies can give us only a faint notion of the effects Christ's teaching must have had on people's minds. He was dangerously latitudinarian. He was subverting the basis of men's hopes. In

one of his public addresses he had actually ventured to improve, as he thought, upon the Law of Moses. His preaching, though often good as far as it went, was lamentably defective. It contained none of the essentials of salvation. He never insisted on the necessity of circumcision; and he even spoke disparagingly of sacrifices. Moreover he openly broke the Sabbath, and believed it possible that the temple might be destroyed. So the religious authorities were roused to a vehement, and at last murderous, hostility.

Meanwhile Jesus calmly pursued his course, and unfolded his grand conceptions. He sought gradually to elevate the minds of his disciples, and, without shocking their prejudices, to lead them insensibly to great principles, before which their prejudices must in time disappear. To the accomplishment of this purpose the parables were admirably suited. The story could be easily remembered, though the full depth of its meaning might not be apprehended for years afterwards. In the explanation, too, of the parables he used the popular language, whenever his so doing would not help to confirm erroneous principles; and in this way he trained his disciples' minds and impressed his spiritual views far more powerfully than he could have done by pursuing what we might consider a more philosophical method.

These observations may help to carry us back to the time when the words of Jesus were gushing forth in all their freshness, and stirring to their depths the hearts of a whole people, and so may prepare us to appreciate more fully the principles involved in the parable of the tares.

The following appears to me to be the leading

thought of the parable:—the good and bad are intermingled all over the world. The faithful subjects of the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed and those who obeyed the prince of evil were to be found everywhere. You could not select one Divine spot, and say that here there is nothing but the choicest wheat, ready to be gathered into the storehouses of God, while all the rest of the ground is overgrown with weeds fit only to be burned. Palestine was not the only sanctuary. The Jews were not the only people whom God remembered. Amongst other nations too there were men who feared God and worked righteousness. In Jerusalem and in Rome, in Greece and in Scythia, the kingdoms of light and darkness were blended together, and shaded into one another by imperceptible gradations. This surely is the picture presented to us by the field sown over its whole extent with both wheat and tares. By the field Christ says expressly that he intends to denote, not Palestine, not the Christian Church, nor the kingdom of heaven, but the world; and this he represents as the abode of two rival families, the children of the kingdom and the children of the wicked one. And as the tares are not all in one part of the field, and the wheat in another, but both are so intermingled that you cannot root up the one without injuring the other, so in every region of the globe the good and bad dwell together, and you cannot send destruction on the latter without involving the former in their ruin. Here, then, we find in a striking form the universal idea which we so often meet with in Christ's teaching. God is not the Father only of a favoured few. Samaritans are not necessarily children of

the wicked one. The Jews are not necessarily children of the kingdom. The worship in spirit and in truth is just as acceptable on Gerizim as at Jerusalem. Injustice and bigotry are just as detestable at Jerusalem as on Gerizim. The kingdom of heaven cannot be defined by place or time. It is everywhere, confronting the kingdom of Satan, contending with darkness and sin.

There is one objection which may be legitimately urged against this view. Jesus represents himself as the sower of the good seed, and must therefore refer altogether to future time, and intend to draw a distinction simply between his genuine and merely nominal disciples. But even if we believe that by 'the Son of Man' Jesus meant exclusively himself,[1] it seems to me that this is laying too much stress on a subordinate portion of the parable. The object is not to describe the origin of good and evil; and it is straining such a popular form of instruction too far to insist that, because Jesus represents himself as the great spiritual sower in the world's field, he therefore denotes by the righteous only those who were made so by his immediate personal agency. He was the representative of the spiritual laws which must govern all the subjects of the kingdom of heaven. His spirit was the criterion

[1] For my own opinion about the use and meaning of the phrase 'The Son of Man,' the reader may consult two articles in *The Journal of Theological Studies*, April and July, 1901. I think that here and in some other passages it may stand 'for man in the ideal sense in which the phrase occurs in *Daniel*, and in which the servant of God' is spoken of in *Isaiah*, the oppressed saints and saviours of men, who at some time are to receive the dominion. This meaning would remove the objection, and admirably suit the general purport of the parable.

by which men were to be approved or rejected; and he therefore speaks of himself as the owner of the field, the ruler of the kingdom. His words seem equivalent to this: 'my faithful subjects, who would acknowledge the authority of my laws, and endeavour to live in conformity with my spiritual rule, are everywhere scattered over the wide world. You cannot go into any region of the earth, and carry on a war of extermination, supposing that you will find there only the children of Satan. In destroying the idolater and the profane you may also strike down a servant of the Most High. For true followers I look far beyond the limits of Palestine. My field is the world.'

Doubtless this principle becomes truer as the world grows older. Doubtless, also, Jesus expected to introduce a higher state of things, and to inaugurate a kingdom of heaven such as none before him had imagined. He naturally speaks, therefore, with reference to the future, and lays down a principle which would become pre-eminently true when his pure doctrines were proclaimed over the whole earth. But the principle itself admits of no limitation in regard to time. There were righteous men before the days of Christ, and in other lands than Palestine; and the emphatic distinction which he lays down is not between Jew and Gentile, nor between Christian and Pagan, but between the righteous and those that do iniquity, whom he had described just before as children of the kingdom and children of the wicked one. The children of the kingdom, then, are the righteous, and these are intermingled with the wicked in every region of the world.

Admitting, then, the main principle, we may now state more clearly a consequence which has been already implied. We must not undertake to separate by any arbitrary distinction of our own one kingdom from the other. The servants were not allowed to go and gather up the tares, lest they should pull up the wheat at the same time. If the tares had been all in one place, they might have been easily removed. But they were in every part of the field, and bore such a close resemblance to the wheat, that they could not be distinguished with certainty till the ear was formed. So it is not for us to say that any regions of the world, or any association of men, are utterly corrupt, and ought to be destroyed. We must wait patiently till the ultimate tendencies of character show themselves in good and evil fruit, when the angels will gather the harvest of souls, and cast out all that offend and do iniquity. We shall never secure the favour of God by daring to anticipate his verdict; and the zeal which leads us to identify our enemies with his, and in his high name to denounce as tares men who honour him no less fervently than ourselves, has not been kindled with fire from his altar. The Lord will not hold him guiltless who usurps the prerogative of heaven, and creates his own petty definition of religious and irreligious, instead of forming a humble and charitable judgment in accordance with the eternal laws of right and wrong, and waiting in patient hope till the last great day reveals the secrets of every heart.

We may now, guided by the light of the parable, return to the question of churches and schisms. A principle which is true of the entire race is no less applicable to separate associations calling them-

selves by the name of churches. Each denomination must contain both bad and good. None is utterly depraved; none is absolutely righteous. It is not for us, basing our superiority on external things, to excommunicate those whom we suspect of being tares. Our judgment is liable to mistakes, and what we suppose to be tares may be only sickly wheat, and is sometimes the most robust and genuine portion of the harvest. Churches calling themselves Christian have, for no other offence than a difference of opinion, exhausted upon their victims all the inventions of a diabolical cruelty; and if only any man was to be found who valued truth above all things else, and had vowed an allegiance to God which all the pomp and all the terror of a religious confederacy could not break, they consigned his body to the slow and pitiless flame. But time has rolled away, and passion cooled; and now it does not require a prophet's eye to see that the martyrs were the wheat and not the tares of the Church. All husbandmen must one day render an account to the Lord of the harvest; and many who now are so proud and self-confident must humble themselves before a greater tribunal than that of man. 'There are first which shall be last, and last which shall be first.'

These remarks may enable us to determine what constitutes a criminal schism. We must not adopt the vulgar notion that all minorities are schismatical, at least in any objectionable sense. According to the principle of the parable schism consists in shutting ourselves up within an enclosure, and insisting that no children of the kingdom of heaven can be found beyond the bounda-

ries of that enclosure. Those who fence themselves round with peculiar distinctions not sanctioned by the Lord of the harvest, and not those who refuse to be imprisoned in such distinctions, are the real schismatics. Those who provide themselves with dogmatic tests by which they profess to discriminate between wheat and tares, those who assert that the viceregal court of the kingdom of heaven must be established in some definite place, and that all who do not recognize the authority of their local and exclusive court must be enemies of God, will be found to be the promoters of schism if we try the case by principle, and not by numbers.

And, on the other hand, a denomination, however small, which steadfastly refuses to apply such artificial tests; which maintains the right of every man to worship God according to his conscience; which believes that the kingdom of heaven infinitely transcends our human distinctions, and over the whole earth blends with various forms of thought; and which will approve men solely in accordance with their moral and spiritual goodness —that denomination, though only two or three be comprised within its pale, is in principle a universal church. Its sympathies are wide as the world. The sects may excommunicate it; but it can love its enemies, and find children of the kingdom mingled with its persecutors. We mourn the schisms of the Church, the body of Christ still bleeding and pierced with the spear of contention. But we must not be led astray by appearances, and tempted to conform to the will of a majority on the ground that we should thus avoid schism. As soon as we assert that all the children of God are comprised within one visible organization, and

declare that others cannot be saved unless they observe our usages and believe our doctrines, then indeed we are setting up dangerous distinctions, and violating the unity of the Church. Jesus stood alone among his people; and they thought him a pernicious weed. Yet they were the schismatics, building ritual walls of partition; he was the universal Spirit, the Son of Man who represented the great heart of humanity, and extended his healing sympathy among all nations.

Where, then, are we to look for the true Church of Christ? Let us abandon the vain search. 'The kingdom of God cometh not with observation; neither shall they say, lo, here! or, lo, there! for behold, the kingdom of God is within you.' It is no outward and visible organization. It is not dependent on the due administration of sacraments by properly qualified priests. It is wider than all sects. The faithful of all communions are its subjects. They shall come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit down at its celestial banquet. Wherever lowly goodness is honoured; wherever justice, mercy, and truth take precedence of superstitious forms; wherever men deny themselves for the sake of humanity and God; wherever love is the central power of life, and the Father is worshipped in spirit and in truth—there is the true Church of Christ, there is the kingdom of heaven. The Spirit bloweth where it listeth, and will not be tied by the rules of any human association. The communion of saints embraces all lands, and reaches through all time. The good are bound to one another by stronger than adamantine chains. The Holy Spirit is their eternal bond, and no

anathema of sect or priest can tear them asunder.

On the other hand, no religious confederation can assure its members of safety. However it may pretend to be the one true Church, all tares within it will be picked out by an unerring hand. No incantation can conjure away the kingdom of sin. All our divisions will be blotted out, and our party names forgotten, or remembered only with shame, when we are brought up one by one to receive the verdict which none can dare to dispute. Then there will be one only test by which we must stand or fall. For 'the Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.'

Chapter III

PARABLE OF THE MUSTARD SEED

Matthew xiii. 31, 32; *Mark* iv. 31, 32; *Luke* xiii. 18, 19.

THE Parable of the Mustard Seed and that of the Leaven are closely related, and appear at first sight to contain the same general idea. The former, however, seems to lay the principal stress upon the gradual growth of the kingdom of heaven from a very small beginning, while the latter refers chiefly to its inward and invisible energy. As these two aspects of the subject present so many thoughts, it may be well to give a separate consideration to each parable.

Before we proceed to the main lesson of the Parable of the Mustard Seed, we must glance at its outward imagery. Why was the mustard seed selected rather than any other as emblematic of the incipient kingdom of God? Probably because it was used proverbially among the Jews to describe anything very small, and the word would immediately suggest to Christ's hearers something minute and apparently insignificant. Those who are ever eager to maintain the literal accuracy of

the Scriptures are puzzled by the declaration that it is the least of all seeds, an assertion which is far from scientifically correct. It may serve to illustrate the strong and broad way in which statements are made even by Jesus himself where the main impression is the only thing to be considered, and the formal accuracy is of no importance; and it may warn us not to press too far the ornament and imagery of his teaching. His words are equivalent to this—We may compare the kingdom of heaven to a grain of mustard seed, which you know is an exceedingly small seed, and yet produces a tree large enough for the birds to come and lodge in its branches. It appears that the mustard tree attains a larger growth in Judea than in colder climates, and the birds exhibit a peculiar fondness for its seeds, and as these approach to ripeness light in numbers on the branches. The birds may be introduced simply as embellishments, to indicate the greatness of the tree, or they may be intended to refer to the various tribes of men coming to find a shelter in the heavenly kingdom.

We may now proceed to consider the essential lesson of the parable. The central thought appears to be that of growth. The spiritual creation of God bears an analogy to the physical, and is subject to the same law of development. The tree of religion does not start into a sudden and preternatural bloom, but slowly unfolds itself from a small and hidden germ. The temple wherein all nations are to worship does not, like a fabled palace, leap from chaos, and astonish our unexpectant eyes; but stone upon stone the fabric is piled up, and only after many ages begins to resemble the plan of the divine architect. This

is a view which men are unwilling to admit. To them the instantaneous conversion of a world without form and void into a verdant paradise bears a surer mark of omnipotence than its gradual evolution through low and imperfect types into higher and still higher shapes of beauty. This feeling in regard to the material creation has been slowly dissipated by the progress of science, and we do not now look back to a certain moment when the universe sprang from the void of a hitherto motionless eternity; but the eye strains itself in vain to pierce the long vistas of time, and, as research becomes more profound, ages distant and more distant still disclose themselves, and, as each rises, it confesses 'the beginning is not with me,' and we cast a glance beyond into the dark unknown.

We see that God does not by a single fiat create all things in their ultimate perfection; but 'the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now,' struggling, as it were, towards a Divine idea, longing for nobler forms of life, 'waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God.' And though to our childish love of the marvellous this may be less astounding than the conception of a universe of light and beauty called from the infinite solitude in a single night or a single week, yet to reason's unimpassioned eye it is immeasurably more august. And even faith may take up her song of praise, for she sees in the outward world a continual unfolding of the Divine thought, and the dullest matter becomes to her enlightened view a tissue of Divine forces.

So, too, in regard to the spiritual creation, our minds need to be disabused of the same prejudice.

We still delight in absolutely perfect revelations, and in statements of doctrine which never can be altered without being spoiled. Wherever we can find traces of imperfection we are certain that God was not present. We regard a scientific blunder as a sure token of the lack of inspiration. Whenever God moves the human heart, the impulse, we think, must be immaculately holy. When he speaks within the soul, his voice must proclaim nothing but immutable truth and unsullied wisdom. What he would reveal must dart like the lightning's flash, or be for ever hidden. A slow, weary unfolding of the highest principles of religion and morality, truth with gradual and unceasing exertion extricating itself from a shapeless mass of error, holiness with unseen expansion rising from an earthly heart and after long years bearing a heavenly fruit—these, we say, are not worthy of an omnipotent Ruler. To such an extent is this feeling carried that some persons have a peculiar fondness for sinners converted in a day into unexpected saints, and murderers raised by the gallows to the rank of angels. Such a mode of operation, however, is not true to our experience; and it would be wiser to accept upon this subject the teaching of Christ, the truth of which men are continually denying, though at the same time they loudly assert his infallibility. If we would only admit his principle that the kingdom of heaven grows like a tree by a natural and unforced process, we should cease to spoil the beauty of that kingdom with our artificial props and bands, and our religious faith would be rescued from many of its difficulties.

We may notice some applications of this principle, which are equally true whether we regard

the kingdom of heaven as existing in the world at large or as asserting its power in the individual mind.

1. First, the kingdom of heaven grows in its extension. When the religious life is awakened in the heart it does not immediately penetrate the entire character. It has to wage a tedious and often a dubious war with ill-proportioned natural tendencies and long-cherished evil habits. Many a sin may be committed while devotion is most sincere. The strong and passionate nature, where religion often finds her noblest temple, may rush precipitately into fearful crimes. The pious David had to atone in tears for the guilt of adultery and murder. His piety was rich and true, but it had not yet subjugated the whole domain of his heart, and established its control over every wild impulse. It had still to expand till it filled the entire man, and his lower passions could find no room to flourish. And so it must ever be. Religion does not in an instant become our one predominant principle. It has its victories, and also its sad defeats, and only by slow degrees does it extend its sway till spirit, soul, and body bow submissive to its rule. This reflection ought to encourage ourselves, and to make us charitable to others. Many a painful fault may remain, while nevertheless religion is a living power and must in time prevail. The grandest characters are often of slowest growth; and the premature religion which seems to spring in a day into its perfect ripeness is apt, like Jonah's gourd, to be smitten by a destroying worm.

So, too, in the world the kingdom of heaven is slowly and silently claiming heart after heart.

God is reconciling mankind to himself, not by violent revivals in which thousands of hardened men are miraculously subdued, though these too may have their place, but by the gradual growth of purer principles and nobler aims. Man after man, and tribe after tribe, are, by a process as unseen as that which has buried ancient forests, rising in the scale of being, removing from the brute and drawing nearer to the Son of God. That man achieves a mighty work who imparts a vehement impulse to the religious life of society; but more blessed, more like the operation of God is the work of him whose consecrated spirit, with unobtrusive power, refines and ennobles many hearts, while his majestic influence is unknown alike to himself and to those whose natures expand beneath its fostering warmth. He plants, it may be, the least of all seeds; but it grows, and becomes a tree, and many a wandering restless soul finds refuge in its branches. And thus, from smallest origin, the kingdom of heaven shall spread till its subjects are numerous as the family of man.

2. Again, the kingdom of heaven grows in purity. The religious life not only assumes in the course of time a wider and more complete dominion, but becomes of a finer quality, more mellow in wisdom, more delicate and far-reaching in sympathy. As the growing fruit not only attains a larger size, but from being green and sour becomes sweet and rosy, so religion slowly puts off its acerbity, and acquires the soft, yet full and rounded, beauty of love. The presumptuous conscientiousness of the youth develops itself into the tender and considerate rectitude of the man. The one-sided zeal of the bigot ripens into the

comprehensive wisdom of the saint. The austerity and self-mortification of the recluse turns into the Christian's self-devotion to the good of others. We have not done all that is required of us when we have brought every impulse under the control of religious principle, but the principle itself should grow higher and nobler, the hidden life which is transforming us should itself more and more nearly resemble the life of God. The serene light that illumines the face of age ought to remind us more of heaven than the sparkling innocence of childhood. We ought still to press forward in hope of a clearer faith, a holier love, a more perfect communion with the Father of spirits, than in our lower moods seems possible to man.

This growth in purity is more apparent in the history of the world than in the life of the individual. Between the religious life of Christendom and that of any low form of idolatry there seems to be an absolute difference of kind. It is not merely that the Christian is more faithful and that his character is more completely under the control of religion. That is often unfortunately not the case. But the religious life itself belongs to a higher type, and only a long process of development could transform the one into the other. How many centuries did it require before the Israelites as a nation abandoned idolatry, and grew into that monotheistic faith from which in later times they never flinched. And how vast is the difference between the armies of Israel piously butchering their enemies and Jesus dying upon his cross. Towards that holy life, that pure and blameless spirit, we must ever press. We must not suppose that the first eager movements of the soul towards God will carry us

to the perfection of Christ. They are but as the little seed which, if tenderly cherished, will become a tree. And if we only commit ourselves in humility to Him who causes the seed to grow, he will unfold the spiritual life in its beauty and its power; and in the last days, amid the complex tissue of our Christian civilization, we shall find that God is nearer than in the times of patriarchal simplicity or crusading fierceness. The religious life of mankind shall for ever approach the life of the Son of God, till the kingdom of heaven is established in unsullied splendour, and God becomes all in all.

3. Once more, as a consequence of this last position, theology, the intellectual expression of religion, must grow. A purer and more devoted life will utter itself in a sublimer truth. A profounder adoration will disclose new mysteries in the Divine nature. A more saintly love will interpret with greater fidelity the character and purposes of God. A soul become more sensitive to every subtle influence which is breathed upon it in the hour of prayer will alter its theory of inspiration. And in general we may say that every increase in the purity and loftiness of our religious affections will necessitate a corresponding growth in their theological expression. For theology interprets the soul's deepest life, and explains the meaning of its penitence, its worship, its aspiration, its hope of immortality; and as these approach nearer to the Divine ideal, theology too must assume a diviner form. Thus the rude notions of one age cease to satisfy the finer sentiment of another, and are superseded by a truer thought.

The doctrine that God is pleased with human

blood falls before a more spiritual conception of sacrifice. The belief that the gods are governed by coarse and brutal passions recedes before the moral idea of the Holy One. In Christendom itself theology will grow just in proportion as the universal Christian mind draws nearer to the mind of Christ. We ought not, then, to be alarmed at the changes which are taking place in theology, but rather hail them as the signs of progress. It is true that under the influence of reaction fantastic and injurious alterations may be suggested. But we must remember that men have deliberately set themselves to oppose the law of growth, and determined to have one immutable code of theology to be held for ever with equal veracity by sinner and by saint. Consequently progress can be made only by sudden leaps, and is sadly unlike the beautiful growth of a majestic tree. But still, though its branches have been tied down, and lopped by an untutored taste into strange and uncouth forms, the tree which has grown from the little seed planted in Palestine nineteen centuries ago will yet assume its natural grace, and men be forced to confess that their presumptuous zeal has never trained so fair a plant as that which is allowed to woo the sweet gales of heaven, and shape itself spontaneously beneath the free Spirit of God.

Such, then, is the principle laid down in the parable. The kingdom of heaven is subject to the same law of development as the visible creation, and through the course of ages is tending ever towards a higher perfection.

To show the precise bearing of this principle upon the questions of biblical inspiration and the nature of revelation would require a separate

essay. But it may be briefly said that throughout the Bible we can distinctly trace the growth of religion, the gradual evolution of truth more and more spiritual, the rise of nobler motives and purer moral conceptions, the dropping away of national and temporary forms of thought, and the unfolding of universal and eternal principles. And in Christianity we find the same law prevailing. It is not offered to us as a perfected system of theology, ethics, and Church-government, but as the living seed from which these shall gradually rise, and conform themselves to a more celestial beauty as men improve in intelligence and religious excellence. The Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus, the Spirit of adoption whereby we pray to God as our Father, that, and not a theology or an ecclesiastical system, is the vital power which is to regenerate mankind. And if we would have a true science of the Divine and Eternal, and would build up a really noble church, we must receive of that Spirit, and implore the Father of mercies to plant it in our hearts, and nourish it with the dews of his grace. And since that Spirit may come in various degrees of fullness, and in future ages may descend upon our race with unexampled power, our loftiest notions now may be low and unworthy in comparison with the truth that is to be revealed, and our proudest churches poor and corrupt beside that Church of the First Born that is to be.

Chapter IV

THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY

Mark iv. 26-29.

THE little Parable of the Seed growing secretly, which is peculiar to Mark, contains substantially the same lesson as that of the Mustard Seed, only dwelling more emphatically on the gradual and natural growth of religion. From the fact that religion, when once planted, grows by its own inherent power, under the kindly providence of God, we may derive an encouragement and a warning. These will be indicated presently; but first a difficulty in the formal interpretation of the parable requires a moment's attention.

The question is asked, who is it that is represented by the man that casts the seed into the ground? If it be said that it is Christ, then those who regard Christ as the omniscient God, who is ever working in the souls of the redeemed, and tending the growth of his word within their hearts, cannot understand how he can be spoken of as sleeping, and allowing the seed to spring up by its own inherent energies. And, on the other hand, they cannot suppose that anyone else can be in-

tended by the reaper of the harvest. Such difficulties need not disturb those who are able, not only to apprehend the supereminent glory of Christ, but to trace through his life the current of human feeling and a progressive spiritual experience. Unless we *feel*, what the most orthodox creed professedly admits, the reality of Christ's human nature, much in his life becomes enigmatical, and much that is full of the profoundest instruction is robbed of its value. His life is far more interesting and precious when we regard him, not as moving in the cold light of certain knowledge, confronting danger with the conscious possession of almighty power, and therefore of total exemption from all real danger, insensible to the trials of faith, and, I must add, to any real need of Divine help, but as one who battled with some at least of our temptations, who felt the mystery of life and resolved it by the energy of faith, who clearly saw the dangers that surrounded him, but rose above them by the power of his devout trust, and whose prayers were the most living and unaffected utterances that ever flowed from human lips.

Then we may lose ourselves in wonder and reverence before the beloved Son, the beloved Brother, and therefore the Reconciler of God and man, in whom our nature finds its secret meaning, and, so far as it is true to him, becomes partaker of his glory. May he not, when he uttered the parable before us, have felt, as many an earnest follower has felt since, a moment's doubt whether his preaching could have any permanent effect upon the miscellaneous crowds which thronged to hear him, and have longed for the power of tending

every separate soul, and watching with careful love its growth in the Divine life? May it not have been one of the trials of his faith to see very seldom the fruit of his labours, and, having sown the Divine word, to leave it contentedly in the care of Him whom he believed to be the Father and Friend of all? And may not the answer to his doubt have been that very parable which he has left for the instruction of his disciples? He was only required to have in spiritual things the faith which the husbandman has in material things; and as the latter, having sown the seed, waits without anxiety for the harvest, so the preacher of righteousness and truth, if he has spoken any living word, may entrust it to the quickening energy of him who is the Lord of the soul as well as the Lord of nature.

This leads us to consider the encouragement which is afforded to us by the parable. A large proportion of our influence over others consists solely in depositing within the mind some little seed of knowledge or virtue; and we are naturally tempted to fear that our labour may be fruitless, and, that, if nothing more than this can be effected, it is not worth our while to attempt even so much. But we forget that truth is not a dead and unorganized thing, but a living principle, which, as soon as it is planted within the soul, begins to gather to itself the needed elements of thought and feeling, and, having rooted itself firmly, to send forth its branches, and gradually to become productive of new and perhaps fairer truths. A single seed planted in a genial soil may be the parent of a forest that overspreads a continent; and a single great principle apprehended by the

mind may give birth to comprehensive views and to a large and manly character. Truth develops itself by a law of its own; and although it may be modified or even suffer deterioration by the influence of circumstances, still it retains the same essence; so far as it is fruitful at all, it is fruitful of good; and it perpetually endeavours by its divinely given energy to resume its proper form, and to cast off any corruption that adheres to it.

Thus the great principles which Christ left in the world have from his time till now been struggling to assume their perfect beauty; and though they have been crusted over with a noxious growth which threatened to choke them, though they have been almost lost amid the more rapid developments of worldly power, still they have struck their roots irremovably into the mind of man, and the living force with which they fell from the lips of Jesus remains in them fresh and vigorous as ever. We must not, then, be discouraged if all that we can do is now and then to bear a faithful witness to the truth, or to drop a word of sound and seasonable advice. We may take our unanxious sleep, and pursue our necessary vocations, trusting the frail seed to a higher than human power. We may settle it as an abiding faith in our hearts that we cannot, out of the living energies of the soul, utter a single word or perform a single action entirely in vain. Whatever life belongs to it at first endures immortally; and it works unseen its own blessed mission in the world.

Turning from the encouragements afforded by the parable, we meet with one or two thoughts which may be accepted as useful warnings.

In education, and to some extent this remark

applies to intellectual as well as moral and religious education, we ought to be most careful to implant what may be called seminal principles, principles, that is, which may be the germ of a multiform development, and which, having a broad and comprehensive bearing, may become fruitful under a variety of circumstances. The mind and character are not to be built up, like a house, by the superposition of materials from without, but to grow, like wheat, appropriating by an inward law the elements needed for their nutrition. Now principles thus permitted to grow according to their own law, while they always retain the same essence, will yet produce in the human mind the same variety which adds so greatly to the charm of the physical creation; and instead of being impatient with this variety we ought to welcome it as the sign of a living growth. It is only things without life that ever bear an exact resemblance to one another, and in proportion to the fullness and compass of the life which is peculiar to any creatures will be the variety which marks its manifestations.

Nevertheless, men have always been intolerant of this variety; and in religion especially, instead of insisting on a few broad principles, and leaving them to work out freely their own results, they have clipped and pruned, and framed acts of uniformity; and nothing has so exasperated them as the appearance of any principle with life so vigorous that it would grow and bear its natural fruit in spite of the opposition of those who allowed confidence in their own opinions to supersede their faith in God. We must all be on our guard against that minute attention to details which interferes

with healthy and energetic action; and if only we are sure that we are inculcating sound principles, we must rejoice to see them ramifying in unexpected directions, and producing results which we have not anticipated. In this sense Christ was pre-eminently like the man in the parable that cast seed into the ground, and then left it to spring forth in its own appointed way. His teaching is remarkable for its abundance of broad principles, and for the rarity of any specific instruction as to the mode of their application. Compare, for instance, his elastic treatment of the Sabbath question with that which prevailed among the Jews, and has prevailed among many Christians. We find no minute regulations for its observance, nothing that can be called a law; but we have these great principles, which are yet to become largely fruitful—'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath'; 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath'; 'My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.'

So, too, in his teaching about God, how little does he say that resembles a theological treatise; how little is there to relieve by his direct authority the perplexities of controversialists! Yet how fruitful in its application both to theology and to the deepest religious emotions is the one word Father, filled as it has been by him with a meaning that cannot perish. And his moral code is in its details of the most unfinished kind, resolving itself into the commandments to be holy, sincere, and loving; for he knew that if holiness, sincerity, and love were planted within the soul, they would frame their own code as circumstances might require. Thus we see that he avoided the con-

struction of a system; not that systems are objectionable in themselves, but they do not possess the attribute of permanence, and if they are enforced upon the mind with the weight of high authority, they deaden rather than quicken. Christ's word is eternal because, avoiding systems, which are inevitably transient expressions of human thought, it went down to those root principles from which all real life must grow, and which in minds of the most varied aptitudes and culture may find some congenial soil, and bear fruit, some thirty, some sixty, some a hundredfold. If we would follow his method, we must not be eager to clip and shape according to our own individual fancy the minds of those whom we can influence, or to force them into the unyielding mould of our peculiar system, but be content to bestow upon them a generous culture, and having sown within them the imperishable principles of righteousness and truth allow them, in ways we know not, to bring forth fruit of themselves.

Lastly, we must not be anxious for too rapid a growth, or be disappointed if progress can be traced only at considerable intervals. The character which, like Jonah's gourd, springs suddenly into a portentous rotundity is liable to vanish as it came; and the too precocious saint is not unapt to harbour the destroying worm of religious vanity and irregular desires, before whose attacks the ill-matured excrescence speedily collapses. Spiritual, like natural, growth has a law of progress, 'first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear.' We need the firm stem of moral principle and self-denial, that will not bend before the storm; we need the cover of modesty and

reverence to shelter the yet tender fruit; and only when the first autumn tints are gathering over life are we to expect the perfect fruit of piety and wisdom.

The forcing system will not in the end produce satisfactory results. In intellectual training it prematurely exhausts the brain, and in religious deprives the character of its manly daring and freedom. The boy is not intended to have the feelings of the man, or the innocence of childhood to weep with the compunctions of age. Now and then an infant Samuel may glow with the prophet's ideal vision, or hear strange voices in the night; but we must not frame our rule from the exception. We must be content if we can observe a real growth, and mark the virtues proper to the season of life. Carefully sowing our seeds, and watchful against every blight, we may then trust our Father to work by his own methods, and to mature the character in the way which seems to him best. Only we must beware how we ever foster that preposterous and debilitating notion that there can be faults or vices proper to any age; for no man has ever seen a full and rounded ear upon the summit of a dwarfed and rotten stem. Immaturity is to be neither wondered at nor deplored; but sin is at all times a deadly blight, and to be shunned as the sure harbinger of spiritual famine. Let progress indeed be slow; but let every part be perfect, that, when the harvest is gathered in, the grain may be full in the ear, and yield itself to the reaper's hand as the mature result of a steady and consistent growth.

Chapter V

THE PARABLE OF THE LEAVEN

Matthew xiii. 33; *Luke* xiii. 20, 21.

AROUND such a phrase as 'the kingdom of God' it is possible for false and fantastic notions to cluster, and selfish passion and revenge threw many a lurid colour over it in the imagination of the oppressed Jews; but Christ presents it to us stripped of earth's vulgar finery, and clad in the simple beauty of its holiness. Whatever notion of power and grandeur and felicity we may associate with the kingdom of God, it denotes in its central thought the reign of God in the human heart, and the supremacy of spiritual laws which are administered with perfect justice and love. These laws exist whether we acknowledge them or not, and no blindness or wilfulness on the part of man can abrogate the fundamental principles of right by which the world is providentially governed. The eternal realm, with its measures of value so different from those of earth and time, and its solemn lights and shades of blessed communion and of retributive woe, closes us in on every side, and waits for free admission to our souls. There

are few souls so dark that no flashes from that higher world light up their gloom; there are many who dwell habitually amid its truth and righteousness, and feel that these constitute the very substance of their lives. The kingdom of God, then, is no far off splendour which we may enter as the reward of our toil; it comes not with observation as a magnificent pageant; but it is now and always in the midst of us, revealing itself through every saintly heart.

These thoughts are suggested by the comparison of the kingdom of God to hidden leaven. This comparison agrees with the parables of the mustard seed and of the seed growing secretly, in indicating a certain slowness in the progress of the kingdom, but differs from them in this, that while the latter refer particularly to its law of growth, the leaven illustrates its inward and constant energy.

The parable has been too commonly understood as descriptive only of the outward fortunes of Christianity, whereas it really enunciates the law according to which the Divine life unfolds itself in the soul and in society; and, so regarded, it stands in antagonism to a principle which has reappeared in various forms in ancient and modern times. The Jews in the time of Christ were inclined to suppose that the kingdom of God would come upon them from without, organize instantaneously a blessed state of society, and supersede the necessity for individual exertion to maintain a heavenly righteousness. The same in its essential thought, though so different in form, is the belief that the true way to ameliorate society is to remodel its circumstances, and if only we can make men's homes clean and respectable, goodness will march

in with smiles upon her face. In such various guise may the same principle present itself, that virtue is the result of a happy combination of outward conditions, and in order to accomplish human reformation we must begin, not with change of heart, but with change of scene. By the parable of the leaven Christ teaches directly the reverse of this principle, that you must begin with a man's inner forces, that you must hide within his soul some Divine energy, which will gradually overcome the dull resistance of circumstance, and change the most unfavourable conditions into means of further progress.

We may perceive more clearly the wisdom of this principle, if we consider a few of its applications. We may select first the case of the individual.

It is not uncommon for men to plead their circumstances as an apology for their vices. If they could only step out of the kingdom of the world, in which they are compelled to move, into the kingdom of heaven, they imagine that they would leave their sins behind them, and their characters would immediately conform to their purest aspirations. I am far from denying that a man's surroundings affect his character, and determine the nature of his temptations and his field of conflict. We have each our besetting sin, or some attraction towards evil which we feel more powerfully than others; and the nature of these depends on heredity and environment. How often do we long to be freed from that temptation, and allowed, without that rude obstruction, to proceed upon the path of goodness. It is not our fault, we say, that we have a hasty temper, that our

disposition is indolent, that our tastes are depraved; and only remove us beyond the reach of these, and place us where no provocation will be offered, no earnest toil required, none but holy images can present themselves, and you will find us immaculately good. It is a weak soul which thus yearns to throw itself into the arms of circumstance, and win its glory, not upon the battlefield, but upon the downy pillow. And it is as mistaken as it is weak.

The man who determines to be good, not now, at this very moment, when his heart is torn with passion, and temptation is sapping his holy purposes, but to-morrow, when passion has worn itself out, and temptation is reposing after its victory, will find himself fatally astray. Sin is not in our circumstances, but in our souls. Drag the sensualist from the scene of his revels, and will saintly purity fall upon him like a mantle? No; but unholy images and desires will throng his brain like demons. Remove the ill-tempered grumbler to some fair paradise, and will he at once be full of sweet content, and not rather complain of the grass being too green, or the sun too glaring, or the rose having too deep a blush? The mind creates its own universe, making the very light impure, the fruits of Eden sour. And while we weakly bemoan our condition, and believe that an unkind providence compels us to be sinful, we may be certain that no change of circumstances would cleanse the inner springs of life, or, if any, a change, not to a more genial, but to a harder lot. Before we can advance on the Christian course we must humbly accept the Divine conditions, and place ourselves trustfully in the hands of God, knowing

that he will do for us what is best. We need not first an alteration in the things around us, however beneficial in some respects that might be, but some hidden power in the heart, some holy affection, some devout trust, or sublime faith, or fervent purpose, which might dwell and work mightily within us, till it leavened our whole being, and we received at last even the redemption of our bodies, release from, or power to endure or to overcome, the trials and temptations which spring from our animal instincts. This is the order of Providence in the growth of our characters. 'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.' A conviction of the enormity of sin flashing into the heart, a sudden repentance, the kindling of a new thought, the vivid apprehension of a higher than self, a revealing of the Son of God within, a perception of an unknown depth of meaning in the Cross, an inward assurance of a Father's love—these will do more to regenerate and ennoble us than an outward kingdom of heaven, which at the best could only form us into puppets, wearing the garb of holiness, but without its soul.

But, it may be asked, how does it concern us to know this? The meal cannot leaven itself, but requires some one to hide the leaven within it. And so the human heart cannot create its own affections, or place an unimagined devotion in the midst of its worldliness and self-seeking. The deadened soul must continue numb unless some pentecostal flame descend upon it with quickening glow. True: we cannot regenerate ourselves, and in the formation of a heavenly character 'it is not of him that willeth, or of him that runneth, but

of God that sheweth mercy.' But, although, on a superficial glance, this might appear to prohibit human effort, a deeper observer will perceive that it is not so. Our noisy willing and running may obstruct the action of Divine mercy, and make us deaf to the Divine voice. We may be self-willed even in the pursuit of goodness; and if we are eager only to cultivate ourselves, and become refined from all vulgar grossness, we miss the inner core of goodness, our self-importance will shed its lurid glow, and no discerning eye will be deceived by our polished selfishness. Or if we insist on labouring for God, as we fancy, only in our own way, confident that we need no further light, we may dash ourselves in the face of Providence, and perform deeds of which we shall long and bitterly repent. And, on the other hand, there is a receptive attitude of the soul, a sustained calmness and submissiveness to which the Divine goodness is revealed; and the maintenance of this attitude, ready to do or to leave undone as the higher Will may direct, betokens a nobler effort than all our feverish zeal or ascetic self-discipline.

Paul, unconverted, was mad for the glory of God, and how little did he know of that glory! But when he was stricken down, and his darkened eyeballs caused him to look within, he saw the despised image of the Son of God, and in the silence of those inactive days he caught the undertones of love, and adored the Divine mercy. And who will say that this man of visions and revelations of the Lord, who felt himself 'less than the least of all saints,' and, counting not himself already perfect, was continually watching for a brighter dawn, laboured less abundantly, or abated his zeal, when

he learned that the excellency of the power must be of God, and not of men? And often since the days of Paul the sick bed, and the dim light, and the soft tread of anxious friends have done more for a man than all the hot earnestness of a life which never paused to listen for holier voices, and behold more blessed visions, than strike the ear and eye. But how much better would it be if in the days of our health and youthful prime we did not trust in our bodily vigour or intellectual astuteness, or in the prosperous condition of our affairs, but felt that all our true life must come from God, and that he alone can hide within us that vital power which will make us truly organs of his will. And though the glory of that life consists in this, that it is not ours, but his, and therefore we cannot create, but only receive and cherish it, there is still abundant room for the exercise of our faithfulness. We may seek the silent hour. We may lay a restraining hand upon our self-confidence, and, looking up to God, beseech him to accept and guide our poor services. And we may be true to what we humbly believe to be his will, and commit ourselves trustfully, yet not boastfully, to the light which we already possess. If any man will act thus, he shall find that, though the kingdom of heaven is in the heart, and can come from God alone, yet sanctifying mercy is no capricious thing, but a perennial fountain, flowing for ever into the lowly and confiding soul, and that more of the Spirit is always present than we in our perversity will follow. Hence it is a matter of supreme moment to know where the Divine life is to begin; whether we are to turn our gaze into the heart, or cast it abroad upon the world; whether we are to

trust to the moulding influence of circumstance, or to the Spirit of God; whether, in short, we are to sigh for an arrangement which will render virtue easy, or to commend ourselves to our Father's love to do with us as he will.

In this connexion, we must observe more particularly that the leaven is spoken of as 'hidden.' Without the qualifying idea suggested by this word, the principle of the parable is undoubtedly liable to abuse. Even after we have admitted that the kingdom of heaven is a power in the heart, and not a happy adjustment of our circumstances, we are still prone to look for its manifestation in some startling and unmistakable form. We expect a violent conversion, or sudden upheaval of our nature, which will overthrow all our previous habits, and transfigure us in a moment into saints; and knowing that such a change has never taken place we fear that we are 'without hope and without God in the world.' Such a mode of thought may lead us into serious errors. Believing that all our efforts must be vain till a Divine impulse stirs the heart, and that our Father's quickening love has never so much as fanned our cheek, we relax our moral exertions, and abandon ourselves in despair to the pursuit of our pleasures. But though sudden conversions do really occur, and many a good man is aware of the exact date when he first consciously devoted himself to God, yet we must not suppose that such instances establish a universal law; nor can we admit that even in their case conversion marks the beginning of the Divine action in their souls; but long before this awakening of their consciousness the leaven was hidden and secretly working. The Lord is oftener in

the still, small voice than in the earthquake or the storm. And it is surely not the truest piety that can discern his agency only when the conscience is violently shocked, or the heart consumed with a remorseful fire.

We must dismiss this idea of his capricious and imposing action. Noisy and violent demonstrations of the new life may suit the self-glorification of sectaries; but God delights to hide the leaven where it will work a silent change, and be reverenced as a holy gift. Every aspiration after better things, every regret for past wrongdoing, every pure sentiment and kindly thought, every touch of sympathy for another's weal or woe, are sent from him. Our boyish admiration for some fictitious hero, our young horror at triumphant wrong, the pensiveness which steals over us in the golden twilight of a summer's evening, the sad memory of days that are gone, the tranquil bliss of domestic love, the simple and spontaneous attention to the wants of others—all these, and a thousand other flitting sentiments which we never chronicle, are leaven which God hides within the soul.

Paradoxical, then, as it may seem, the man who believes that without the leavening influence of Divine grace he can do nothing good, far from abandoning himself to mere impulse, or wasting the precious moments in dreamy inaction, will rouse himself to a more earnest endeavour; for, conscious of darkness, he will prize as of inestimable worth the little ray that glimmers on his path, and will seek for clearer light with that imploring and humble eagerness which is never denied. Knowing too that all that is holiest within him

is the unmerited gift of God, he will shrink from abusing that gift, and will exercise his powers with a reverent conscientiousness unknown to those who trust a less sacred guide. God never leaves himself without a witness. We have only to hush the profane clash of lower interests to hear the soft accents of his mercy calling us to himself. In our lower moods the leaven may seem utterly hidden; but the piercing eye of faith will detect it always there. Only let us reverence every holy thought and impulse, however faint, and we shall find it possessed of a Divine and imperishable strength. The kingdom of heaven within us may unfold its treasures by slow degrees; but unless we wilfully obstruct it, it will go from glory to glory, till it reclaims each rebellious wish, and subdues our whole being to itself.

Having considered the case of the individual we might deem it superfluous to discuss the application of the same principle to society, which is only an aggregate of individuals. But the question assumes a somewhat different aspect when we have to deal with large masses of men; for you may make statements in regard to extensive communities which you could not refer with certainty to their several members. We may know, for instance, with tolerable accuracy, how many out of a certain number will die within a given time, or, in other words, we may know the rate of mortality in society, though the duration of individual life is beyond the reach of calculation. And so it is conceivable that skilful social arrangements might elevate the moral tone of the community, though you could not feel confident in regard to any individual that his character would

be improved by the change. Although we may be conscious in our own case that an improvement in the drainage of our houses would not increase our spirit of self-denial, we nevertheless have a vague feeling that comfortable houses and wholesome food exercise an important influence upon the virtue of a people. It is needful, then, to give a separate consideration to the case of society, and especially as the question at issue is one of great practical importance in the present day.

There appears to be a tendency in our time to place the first reliance upon the material results of civilization, and to regard religion as at best a very secondary agent in the improvement of mankind. This opinion may seldom be broadly stated; but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the general tendency of thought is in this direction, and that many who would not say one disparaging word of religion nevertheless repose their confidence, unconsciously perhaps to themselves, on the material rather than the spiritual, on social science and organization rather than on Christian love and duty.

In protesting against this order of thought let me not be misunderstood. I have no desire to undervalue the various agencies by which it is sought to ameliorate society. A free constitution, an extensive commerce, charitable institutions, well ventilated and well lighted houses are all great blessings, and to be prized accordingly. Yet it is possible to attach even to these things an undue importance, or rather, through our absorption in these, to forget what is still more precious than they. In their proper place, and exercising their legitimate function, they cannot be too highly

esteemed; but when they claim for themselves an independent power, and put themselves forward as a kingdom of heaven which is sure to create a celestial community, it is time to recall attention to the everlasting principles which lie behind them, and to which they are indebted for their entire value. Men are readily swept away by a single idea; and, dazzled by these splendid results of modern art and science, they conclude that these are the greatest benefactors of mankind, and that the continued prosecution of them is certain to end in the establishment of a perfect society. This state of feeling is quite compatible with the most benevolent intentions, and even with a large share of religious trust. Philanthropists, indeed, are by no means the least liable to this kind of mental narrowness, and religion does not always ripen into a mature wisdom. We are now and then favoured with schemes which, if carried out, would terminate that misfortune which we call crime, and convert the earth, desolated by the misrule of kings and priests, into a verdant paradise. In all such schemes, it appears to me, reliance is placed upon the wrong things; and while I would earnestly advocate the study of social science, and the adoption of wise and well considered measures for the amelioration of the people, I would nevertheless protest against an undue trust in these things to the disparagement of personal fidelity and exertion.

The true light in which to regard all institutional arrangements for the improvement of a people is that of machines for the transmission of mental force. In themselves they are nothing; but under the superintendence of able minds they become productive of vast benefits. As the steam-

engine would stand idle were it not for the unseen power of heat, so the most admirable organization for elevating mankind would be futile if we withdrew the earnest thought and persevering industry which are needed for its direction. It is not in reality the institution that does good, but the minds that are working through it, and alone can bestow upon it a vital energy. Remove the moral power which must lie at the centre of a nation's prosperity, and all human hobbies or nice adjustments of conflicting self-interests will prove themselves the weak, dependent creatures which they are, and society will collapse. Supposing we were suddenly endowed with omnipotent power over circumstances, and with benevolent zeal we converted all the dens in which human creatures live into spacious and healthy houses, introduced an abundant supply of light and water, demolished the filthy haunts where vice destroys her victims, and which respectability is content quietly to ignore, and by an equal distribution of the resources of the country bestowed a competence upon all, yet if we did not increase the moral energy of the people, and arouse within them a new spirit of self-denial, of prudence, probity and industry, in a few generations the old state of things would return; the self-indulgent and improvident would leave large families dependent on the earnings of others, immoral craftiness and violence would seek a subsistence by crime, wealth would have to be lavished on all the processes of law, the roofs of the model dwellings would begin to leak, whole families would huddle together in single apartments, violating all the decencies of life, and living and dying in misery, as it is this day. All our con-

templated improvements depend for their permanent value upon the moral tone by which they are pervaded; and only when the higher minds act through their agency upon the lower and less cultured will they be productive of the truest good.

So, too, in relation to our country's greatness we are in danger of inverting the true order of thought. We are proud of our constitution, our laws, our commerce, and all the appliances of civilization. But these are valuable only as the agents of great minds. Transfer them to a community of apes or a race of savages, and they will instantly become worthless. Let the moral faithfulness and mental power of England's sons degenerate, and no freedom of the press, no extent of coal-fields, no commerce drawing its circle round the world, will save her from sinking into insignificance. Her continued greatness depends not primarily on her institutions, but on the reverence, the earnestness, the intellectual force, the industry and integrity of the rising generation.[1]

And again the same inversion has been carried into our religion. There are persons who long for a machinery by which devotion may be manufactured, and through the operation of which men may be converted without trouble into saints. They forget that the sublimest works of genius, the grandest offerings which art has ever laid upon the altar of religion, will not foster the flame of pure and sacred feeling in minds which have lost their moral earnestness, and desire the kindling rapture

[1] These remarks were written long before the great war. Germany has furnished a terrible illustration of their truth. Wealth, comfort, intellect and knowledge have not saved it from the morality of savages.

only as a means of rendering life less insipid. In none of these things does the kingdom of heaven consist; and those who expect a crown of life to drop upon the heads of the people, while they care so little for that crown that they will not grasp the sword of the Spirit, and tread, if need be, the crimson field of battle and suffering, will find their expectation turned into bitterness, and learn with grief that no material combinations can create the spiritual force which marks the sons of God.

'The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.' Great social improvements, all real progress in a nation's life, begin in the energy of some mind. An intensity and fullness of life, long hidden perhaps in the lower strata of society; a depth of thought concealing itself in some obscure study; a mighty faith, nurtured for years by secret prayer—these are the powers which elevate a people, creating new ideas, promulgating new truths, and extending the dominion of religion and morality. Mind acts on mind; and the well of life within the soul overflows, and with its waters enriches the souls of others.

The influence of a pure and devoted spirit spreads in ever widening circles, acting first on those in immediate contact with itself, then through their agency upon others more remote, till it gradually leavens the whole mass of society, and at last finds expression in wiser political arrangements and nobler religious forms. If we are really anxious to benefit our race, and to mitigate permanently those evils which sadden all Christian men, we must strive above all to receive a purer and intenser life into our own hearts, that we may be

enabled to waken the dormant life of others; and in all our benevolent efforts we must keep in view the paramount importance of the soul, and be less eager to make men comfortable than to lead them to repentance, and by stirring up their faith and love impart that energy and independence of character which will enable them to make themselves comfortable, and to be a source of blessing to the neighbourhoods in which they live. We know not the power of a life consecrated to a higher Will, and pervaded by the Spirit from on high. No self-denying deed can fail to produce its blessed fruit. Whether we labour in theology, in teaching, in art, in philosophy, or in trade, if we seek not our own will, but the will of him to whom we all belong, we shall be public benefactors, and exalt the life of our time. Every man and woman may be a centre of divine energy to heal the world's woes, and ennoble future generations. It is men, not measures or institutions, that are the redeemers of the world.

We are sceptical in regard to this spiritual power because we cannot give statistics of its results. It works so silently and unseen that we question its reality. Only now and then does a heart yield up its secret, and confess that it owes the awakening of its better life to the influence of a soul more saintly than itself. Yet if we cast our eye over history we find abundant evidence to justify our faith. The grandest reformation the world has ever known was not the result of an elaborate system, but due to the commanding power of a single soul. It was spiritual in its origin, and all its real triumphs have been spiritual. Look at the beginning of that reformation. How modest!

How remote from the stir and tumult of the world, and the contests of ambition! Who in that vast empire which boasted so loudly of the progress of civilization, which made the earth tremble before the might of its legions, and believed itself destined to an eternal duration, would not have scoffed had he been told that in an obscure town of Galilee one was growing up who would have a wider dominion than the Cæsars, and whose name would be honoured when the eternal city was filled with the ruins of departed greatness. In the humble retirement of his home he lived till he was thirty years of age. For a year or two he laboured chiefly in the towns and villages of Galilee. He gathered round him a few devoted men taken from the humbler walks of life. At last he provoked the hostility of the priests, and was put to death as a common criminal.

For a time the public heard nothing more of his doctrines or his claims. But soon the simple men who had followed him came forward to tell of the new life which they had found in him. As they were assembled in an upper room the Spirit filled them with such power that they could not be silent. Thenceforward they spoke to all who would hear them. Scattered by persecution they visited various towns, and, wherever they went, collected around them a little band of believers. These early converts were for the most part possessed of small social influence. In the wealthy cities of the Roman Empire business, gaiety, idolatry, philosophy, vice, pursued their usual course, and cared nothing for the tremendous power which was hidden and secretly working in the midst of them. Or, if the petty sect was made the subject of an hour's

gossip, it was dismissed with a cultured sneer; or the suffering of the latest martyr was laughed at as an instance of the folly and obstinacy of mankind. But from soul to soul the eternal life passed on. The wrath of man could not stop it. Heart after heart yielded to its magic sway, and at last old abuses fell before its power, and the world entered on a new career.

This supplies us with the law of social improvement. It depends on the power of devoted men. The leavening influences must still pass from mind to mind. Make Christianity a system, and you rob it of its peculiar force. Our systems 'have their day, and cease to be'; but the life of love shall never cease. As soldiers of the cross, and lovers of human kind, we have not to contend for a 'scheme of salvation,' but to show forth in our own lives the majesty of that Spirit which was in Christ. And on our fidelity to that Spirit depends in part the ultimate triumph of the kingdom of God. Without the high faith and burning love of living souls it must be utterly defeated; and a dead organization will strive in vain to vivify society. But goodness, however modest its aspect, possesses an undying power; and the word of truth bravely spoken, though it be in the lowliest cottage, drops not idle to the ground. For 'the kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.'

Chapter VI

PARABLE OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE

Matthew xiii. 44.

IN the foregoing parables Jesus spoke of the kingdom of heaven chiefly on its theoretical side, laying down broad and important principles in regard to its nature and development. These he addressed to the multitude who had assembled to hear him, seeking gradually to wean their minds from the narrowness and prejudice which presented such a formidable obstacle to the reception of his spiritual faith. But when he had retired into the house, and was surrounded by his more immediate disciples, who, it may be supposed, had already some experience of that kingdom, he referred more particularly to its practical aspect, and enforced its application to the individual conscience and life. We may imagine him sitting in a small room, pouring out his thoughts with a pleading earnestness which riveted the attention of all, while his eye seemed to penetrate the secrets of each heart, its trials, its dangers, and its joys. His disciples stand around with faces expressive of varied emotion, some lifted in devout hope, some bent in sorrowful regret, some few, it may be,

striving to conceal their sullen disappointment and fear.

The circumstances in the Parable of the hidden Treasure require but little special notice. The finding of a hidden treasure was, in the East, a sufficiently common event to render the comparison natural. In the insecurity of property under a despotic government men frequently concealed a portion of their wealth, and then, if they died without betraying their secret, the treasure remained buried till some wayfarer accidentally discovered it, or the husbandman turned it up with his plough.

Those who assume that a parable must in all its parts correspond with the spiritual fact to which it relates are perplexed by the conduct of him who finds the treasure. It seems dishonourable that he should conceal his good fortune from the owner of the field, and purchase it in all probability at a price which he must have known to be far below its value. It may be that oriental usage would have sanctioned this; but in any case it need not disturb us, for it is not Christ's purpose to lay down the law in regard to the finding of treasure, and it is by no means his invariable practice to carry the parallel through every clause of his parables. Here the unexpected discovery, the joy, the selling of everything in order to secure the treasure, appear to be the essential points, and other incidents are added to complete the natural circumstances of the story.

Many, again, consider it necessary to find a special meaning for the field and the treasure, and it is easy for each writer to apply these words to his own purposes. Some suppose that the field

represents the Bible, the treasure the religious wisdom contained in it. To others the field stands for the outward and visible church, the treasure for the inward and spiritual. Thence it is readily inferred that, as in the parable the treasure cannot be obtained without the field, we can have no true enlightenment without the Bible, or that we cannot have a genuine spiritual life without first enrolling ourselves as members of the outward church. I cannot see that the parable has any bearing whatever upon these ecclesiastical matters, nor can I suppose them for a moment present to the mind of Christ. The devout mind may indeed apply much in the parables to its own peculiar experience, and we may have purchased many fields with hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge; but we must not make what is merely personal the key to interpretation, nor erect into a universal truth what may be only an incident in our private history. To me it seems that the field is mentioned simply as the most natural place wherein to find the treasure, and the purchase of the field as the most obvious way of securing the prize. Let us, then, pass by these minor matters, and proceed to consider the great spiritual lessons unfolded in the parable.

The first point to be noticed is the comparison of the kingdom of heaven to a hidden treasure accidentally discovered. This is not intended, as we shall see in the next parable, to represent an invariable experience, though it is applicable to a large number of instances. To many souls the religious life comes unexpectedly. New ideas, aims, and affections suddenly arise. Having lived for themselves, they are overwhelmed with a

feeling that to live for God can alone deserve the name of life. Submission and fidelity to his will, the importance of all things measured by their relation to him, calmness and peace amid the vexations of the world, a loving honour towards all men, notwithstanding their infirmities, perverseness, and sin—these come like the discovery of an unknown treasure, revealing their brightness and purity to eyes which had often gazed on the very spot where they lay concealed, and observed nothing but the dull clods. This must have been a frequent mental revolution in the early ages of Christianity. Men's hearts burned within them, they hardly knew why. The fisherman mending his net, the tax-gatherer collecting his dues, were borne away by a power they seemed unable to resist. They were fascinated by the new life, the wonderful thoughts, the generous aims, the sublime and serene faith, which Jesus brought before them. As some of the disciples listened to the parable, they must have felt that they were the very men intended. The religion which filled them with such joy was not the reward of any labour of theirs, but an unlooked for treasure. God's love was seen to be the only source of their blessings. He had called them by his grace, and, mercifully overlooking their past sins, had chosen them for himself. Thus their hearts may have glowed with gratitude, and their eyes have glistened, while they thought how they, poor workmen on the world's hard field, had found a store of wealth which they would not exchange for the grandest of earthly thrones. And though in our own time, when we are more or less familiar with Christian ideas from our earliest years, we cannot expect

this finding of the hidden treasure to be so frequently and fully exemplified, can we not sympathize with the feeling of the first disciples? How many are there with whom religion has passed from a mere social usage into the profoundest individual life through the agency of some apparent accident? Their minds have been enlarged, conviction has come with an unimagined fervour and force, penitence has dissolved them in tears, pride has abandoned the contest and owned the will of God to be best, a sacred peace has fallen upon the fretful nerve, they know not precisely why or whence, except that it is from the Father of mercies, who is never far away even from the obstinate and rebellious heart. Probably far more than we commonly suppose remember the precise moment when they found all that they esteem most venerable, when for the first time they bowed in heartfelt prayer, and owned, not with the service of the lips, but the homage of the soul, the nearness of their communion with God. They have felt almost as vividly as John himself that the Christian life is known by revelation; that it is God who chooses men, not men who choose God; that without him man can do nothing; that his glory is the end of human aspiration, and man can have no real glory but in him.

And even those to whom the full flood of the religious life has appeared to come, not in one impetuous gush, but in solemn and silent flow, must confess that they are often replenished by some unmerited mercy which they looked not for. They may fail indeed to acknowledge so gratefully God's guiding providence, because the finding of the treasure is with them a tardy process, and

instead of their stumbling in an instant on an immense mass of wealth, now a coin, and now a jewel, offers itself to their unexpectant eyes. But is it not rather a want of devout observation than of happy experience which prevents us from thanking God every day of our lives for some unanticipated discovery? Now we open a book, and meet a sentiment precisely suited to our state of mind. Now a friend steps in, and by his pleasant conversation chases away our gloom. Sometimes a disappointment makes us more cautious and thoughtful when we were growing hasty and inconsiderate. Or the sorrow of one whom we disliked or suspected compels us to regard him with a more Christian sympathy. Even our own waywardness and fretfulness may drive us to seek a peace which is not of this world. And sometimes a change comes over us from no apparent cause; the voice within speaks more audibly, and we are more submissive than before. Had we but eyes to see, we should find the common field of our life strewn with treasure, hidden indeed from the self-seeking and avaricious, but revealed to the pure and simple. Thus, both to those whose souls have been suddenly awakened, and to those whose progress has been less marked by any violent change, 'the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hid in a field,' found without any care or forethought of our own, and requiring, not an arduous search, but our grateful, though not, as we shall see, unconditional acceptance.

'When a man hath found' this treasure, he 'hideth' it. This statement corresponds with a spiritual truth, and suggests a caution for the guidance of our conduct. When we are filled with

new emotions, wonder, gratitude, and love; when life has suddenly risen in our estimation from an earthly, perishable, and selfish thing, and become linked with a heavenly and immortal destiny, and consecrated to holy and generous aims, we cannot at once proclaim the change that has come over us, but with a reverent reserve we keep these things and ponder them in our hearts. No human being seems capable of according that sympathy for which we long, and, like Paul in his Arabian retreat, we prefer to commune alone with God. For a wise purpose was this shrinking from publicity bestowed. If the finder of the treasure had immediately announced his fortunate discovery, he would never have obtained it. So, too, in the spiritual life, if with a rash eagerness we betray our new found faith, and expose each tremulous feeling to the gaze of the unconcerned; if we subject our high and pure sentiments, which, though fresh and glowing, have the weakness of immaturity, to the criticism and coldness, or still worse to the applause and flattery of the world, we may learn to our dismay that we have not secured our possession, and that the angels of God do not visit the sons of men merely to be turned out of the heart's sanctuary, and paraded as honouring guests before the public eye. It requires a strong hand and steady nerve to maintain lofty principles before the world, and preserve them in untarnished purity; and the raw recruit must not attempt the work of the veteran. I fear that many have made shipwreck of their faith because, inspired by no awe, they refused to keep it for a time in the sheltered haven, and, with an impatient zeal, launched it on the stormy ocean,

to be buffeted by winds and waves which it was too feeble to resist.

Besides that modest reserve which characterizes all deeper natures, and constitutes no inconsiderable portion of their strength, there is another wise and merciful provision. The newly awakened sentiments of religion are full of joy, and by reason of this joy men readily incur sacrifices from which, under a less powerful stimulus, they would shrink. To abandon old habits, and forgo long-cherished pleasures; resolutely to deny every low taste and unworthy principle; to become patient and considerate from being hasty and imperious; to take a Christian view of our fellow men, whom we have regarded with a cynic's sarcasm; to repress, because it is ill natured and unjust, the remark which we thought clever and witty; to apply, with unflinching scrutiny, the law of goodness to all our transactions, and exercise self-control, meekness, and charity in our inmost thoughts—all this is far from easy, and at the beginning of our course might appal the stoutest heart were it not for the joy attending our new experience. But the rapture of surprised vision, the blessedness of communion with the Father, the glory of the sons of God, whose exalted hopes sweep over eternity—these enable us to bear a cross, and pray that we may enter into the kingdom of heaven even if we must do so through much tribulation.

Yet we must not place too much confidence in the energy of this joyous impulse. It is given to support us in our labours, and prevent the untrained soul from fainting in its warfare, but cannot supersede the necessity for our patient efforts. In our first exultation we fancy that never more

can we depart from God, that our love can never cool, the heavenly vision never fade away in earthly mist. We are tempted to sit beside the treasure, admiring each costly gem, wondering at the value of such fine gold, and forgetting that we must be up and doing if we intend to secure the glittering prize. He who, in the parable, found the treasure went and sold all that he had, and bought the field. This represents the one condition of our obtaining an entrance into the kingdom of heaven. We must, in a figure, sell all that we have, dedicating ourselves without reserve to the higher will, and making no exception in favour of our cherished passion. The strength, the calmness, the trust, the fullness of life and joy which belong to the service of God, never can be ours while we refuse to offer that one sacrifice which he requires. Our souls will be desolated by a civil war if we persist in following some practice, or fostering some motive, which we cannot justify, and strive vainly to withdraw from the rebukes of our conscience. And in time, a hard defiant spirit will creep over our characters, and we shall learn to detest the prophet who speaks in our ear the very words of warning which we have smothered in our own hearts. We may think it a stern requirement that we must surrender to the power of religion a propensity which has twined its roots around us, and to eradicate which is like tearing out our eye or cutting off our hand. But does not that master passion indicate precisely the point where we are most strongly in opposition to the divine will? And is it not precisely the foe that unchecked will lead us to our ruin? There was one in the company of disciples, listening probably to this very parable, who, like the rest,

had received a call to be partaker of the kingdom, but would not sell all that he had. Even his mean soul may have glowed with a transient joy, and godliness and self-denial have seemed grander than the money obtained by a tricking bargain. But avarice he could not crucify; and the name of Judas Iscariot has descended to posterity shrouded in the blackest infamy.

And who but God can tell what will be the end of that love of pleasure which we will not moderate, of that greediness which we will not repress, of that anger and vindictiveness which have never been touched with the peace of heaven? All these we must relinquish, if we would not cast a fond look at the sacred treasure, and then forfeit it for ever. Oh! then, if any soul is uplifted with a hallowed joy, if a beam of golden light has shot across its darkness, and the love of God appears the one great reality of life, which alone imparts meaning and dignity to the business, the pleasures, and the sorrows of this world, let it not rest content with that devout rapture, believing it can never die, but under that glad impulse renounce every unholy thing, and consecrate every power to ideal ends. And, when, through perfect self-surrender, we have won that hidden treasure which God mercifully revealed, we shall look back in surprise at the little sacrifices which now appear so great, and wonder how we could ever have hesitated between God and mammon, between a mortal and corruptible and an immortal and incorruptible wealth.

Chapter VII

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

Matthew xiii. 45, 46.

THIS parable bears a close resemblance in some of its features to that of the hidden treasure, and after our remarks upon that parable requires little to be said in the way of direct exposition. There is, however, a striking difference in the opening of the two parables, a difference which not only furnishes matter for useful thought, but is particularly interesting as an illustration of the comprehensiveness of mind with which Jesus regarded these questions. He did not, like so many theologians, confine his view to a single phase of our complex nature. In comparing the kingdom of heaven in the soul to a hidden treasure accidentally discovered he recognized the free and unsolicited action of the Divine Spirit, and appealed to our devout and grateful feelings. But he did not therefore maintain that human agency was futile, and we must wait passively for an overwhelming impulse from above before we can make any progress towards a higher life. Indeed, he might seem to have apprehended such an abuse of

his doctrine, as he immediately adds a parable in which the treasure is not detected by a fortunate chance, but found by a patient and earnest search. And I cannot but think that he attaches peculiar importance to this search, because he does not compare the kingdom of heaven to the costly pearl, but to the merchant engaged in seeking for it, as though this eager, inquisitive spirit were characteristic of the kingdom, and they were nobler men who look diligently for some high truth, or precious law of life, than those whose dull vision never penetrates beneath the surface of things till some signal providence startles them from their lethargy. Does he not intimate that those who long for something more pure and beautiful than a sensuous existence, and who exercise their skill and discrimination in selecting goodly pearls of truth, belong already to the kingdom of heaven, though they may not yet have discovered that one inestimable principle by which alone they themselves and all things else can be brought to harmony and peace?

Hence we may derive both a consolation and a warning. We may rejoice to believe that God does not frown upon our anxious endeavours to determine between the true and the false, and to separate what comes from him and is eternal from doctrines which owe their origin to human limitation and weakness; for these endeavours are of the very nature of his kingdom. And, on the other hand, we may learn that this research is a sacred duty, and we must not remain content with a low and earthly life in expectation that an irresistible grace will come at last, and change us in an instant. The mercy of God is no apology for the unfaithfulness of man.

While, then, we adore our Father's unmerited love, and thankfully acknowledge that the smallest grain of his truth far exceeds the deserts of our indefatigable toil, let us consider also the duty devolving on us of seeking the true and the good.

This duty exists prior to any profound religious life. The power of searching for an ideal good is characteristic of beings with souls. There is in man a spiritual force which refuses to be satisfied with the world of sense. The routine of business and of pleasure cannot satiate his mental hunger. He cannot feel that his nature finds its true end in these things. He has nobler capacities which are struggling for supremacy, and will not suffer him to rest. He explores the past, and endeavours to look behind the veil of the future. Everywhere he sees change. Things appear and vanish. Affections that once burned, hopes that glowed like the dawn, pains that seemed an unendurable burden —what are they now? Phantoms, flitting to and fro in the cold chambers of memory. And soon he himself must depart, and lie motionless and unconcerned, while the world's traffic roars above him. A little longer and the eyes that wept his loss will close, and none know or care that he has ever lived. What does it all mean? Is it the dreadful sport of an unintelligent destiny, coming from nothing, and tending to nothing? Can we be satisfied with such an answer? Will our souls cease to be disquieted if, like a dog, we receive to-day our meat and drink, and can lie down at its close in warmth and comfort? Or is there not that within us which declares that behind all appearances there is some eternal significance; that the universe is moving towards a glorious end; that there is an everlasting beauty,

an indestructible truth, an unchangeable goodness ? Must there not be a centre of repose for our nature, something that will fill its cravings, and endue it with perfect blessedness ?

Such questions present themselves to every mind, not perhaps in formal words, but at least in an undefined feeling. Not without a stifling of the higher spirit can any man be content to eat and drink, to labour, to enjoy, to suffer, and to die, without inquiring into the purpose of his life, and seeking some holy law which will guide him to his supreme good. We ought solemnly to ask ourselves why do we exist ? For what shall we live ? And not be satisfied without an earnest answer. Let us cease to traffic in worthless trinkets, and seek for goodly pearls, those graces of character, those ornaments of knowledge and truth, which can never perish, but will appear more and more precious the longer we possess them. No man can prosecute a diligent and patient search without attaining a deeper insight into the kingdom of heaven ; nor can he abandon himself to any pure conception or generous purpose, and fail of his reward. Mysteries will unveil themselves to his penetrating glance. He will learn to distinguish with ready accuracy the genuine simplicity of truth from the spurious bawble of a pretentious ignorance. And if, faithfully denying the outward and corruptible, he seek the inward and eternal, he will at last find that one central principle which will gradually purify him from his mortal grossness, and conform him to the true ideal of humanity.

The truth of the following remark will perhaps be less readily conceded. The obligation of research continues even after we have risen above

the world, and accepted the Spirit of Christ as the rule of our life. The kingdom of heaven is not a state of lethargic ease, in which there is no richer truth to discover, no nobler duty to perform, but is like a merchantman *seeking* goodly pearls, and, whenever he has found one distinguished above the rest by its rarity and beauty, devoting everything to its attainment. Thus are combined within it the eager, yet reverent, quest for something still more divine, and the zealous dedication of self to the highest known truth, which ought always to be our one supreme law. It has neither the stagnation of an assumed orthodoxy nor the coldness of a conceited scepticism. Fervour is blended with humility, aspiration for a more glorious future with gratitude for the revelations of the past. Let us glance at this principle in a few of its applications.

In regard to religious *truth* we must not be tamely quiescent, as though we had explored all mysteries, and no fairer light could ever rise upon our souls. Deeply as we may value every intimation of the eternal and the holy, transported as we may be by every glimpse into the great spiritual laws which pervade the universe, it surely is no mark of piety to pretend that the vast ocean of being has delivered to our keeping all its secrets, and there is nothing more to be known of the infinite Creator. Can we suppose that we have measured the length and breadth and depth and height of that Love which passes knowledge, that we have understood the profoundest calmness of that Peace which exceeds all understanding, that we have traced every operation of that Spirit which bloweth where it listeth, and, like a breeze, comes and goes, we can-

not tell whence or whither? What if this boasted wisdom be but foolishness, and the wild cry 'we see, we see' be only the deluded self-confidence of men groping and stumbling on their uncertain way? If we are never to pursue religious inquiry, and stand face to face with the question 'what is truth?' it is obvious that our belief will be an accident of our birth, and our religious affiliation will depend on our parentage alone.

If we would be worthy members of the kingdom of heaven, we must seek for ourselves a living and quickening faith. And however glorious may be the truth that we have found, still we must gaze upwards, and remember that it is but a faint and trembling ray from that holy and eternal light which mortals may not look upon and live. Not that it is less really light because it is so small a beam. It is a foregleam of that splendour which awaits the faithful, and will guide our feet to a higher eminence where a fresh brilliance will burst upon the view. It is in truth life eternal to know the Father, and to know in his Son the depths of the human spirit and its wonderful relations, and the smallest germ of such knowledge awakes the throb of a conscious immortality. But how vast and far-reaching is this knowledge! Who will say that it is his in its perfection, that he has ceased to know in part, and already knows even as he is known? It is blessed to think that, though we are children, often rebellious, sinful, unholy, still we know that Father enough to trust him, and know that Son enough to reverence and love the soul of man; and it is blessed too to think that inexhaustible wonders await us, and we shall never cease to drink of the fullness of that knowledge.

Again, we must inquire diligently into the relations subsisting between the truth and our active life. In other words, we must scrutinize our duties, see that we apprehend them aright, and that the noblest of all is not escaping our notice through the carelessness of our search. The necessity for this may appear from the great variety in the clearness of men's moral perceptions. Some have a coarse, rough morality, which is content with broad and general principles, and allows considerable laxity in matters of minor importance; while others have a delicate discernment, and apply the law of right to transactions the most insignificant. Here is an interesting field for investigation, and one which we cannot neglect without culpability. The plea that in any instance we did not perceive our duty can hardly be admitted as a valid excuse if we never sought for it. And yet we are little in the habit of conducting inquiries of this kind; and probably the inconsistency observable between men's faith and practice is due, not so much to any conscious insincerity or disobedience, as to their failure in this one respect.

Religious inquiry, in its application, is generally limited to theological doctrines, and to literary and scientific questions which have become involved in theology. The ultimate basis of belief; the nature and evidence of revelation; the use of the Bible; the origin, significance, and credibility of the several books contained in it; the truth of commonly accepted Christian dogmas; these are the topics which rush to the mind when religious inquiry is commended. But while these subjects are agitated with various degrees of charity or bitterness, of learning or ignorance,

there is a far more serious question close to every heart—How shall I worthily live? How shall I incorporate each acknowledged truth in my daily words and deeds? How shall I please the great Sovereign of my life in all I speak and do? Religious truth is higher than questions of authorship or the credibility of ancient cosmogonies. Religious life is grander than the philosopher's soaring speculation, or the poet's most enraptured dream. And the oracles of duty which call us from our selfish darkness are holier than the lifeless theory which leaves us to moulder in the tomb of our sin. No hasty and superficial glance will suffice when we turn our attention to these lofty themes. For what testing of the motives, what probing of the thoughts, what solemn conferences with the word hidden in the heart, are demanded! But if we persevere, shall we not find at last a pearl of rarest value, which we shall consider cheaply purchased by the sacrifice of all that we possess?

But when we have ascertained the relation of truth to our active life, and have surveyed both great and small duties, even then we must not pause. We must seek an inward purity. We must search for emotions, desires, affections, instincts, with a higher tone. We must not be satisfied till even those stray conceptions which roam about the mind regardless of the will are holy. The conscience which we endeavour to keep always on the strain may break. The mind which we never unbend will acquire a repulsive stiffness. We are not secure till our heart's resting-place is in God, and his love is its spontaneous joy when the strain of exertion is relaxed. Not only to be believers in the truth and doers of

the word, but to be temples of the Holy Spirit, having every part hallowed by an all-pervading sanctity, is the Christian aim. Love should be the very soul of the disciple's being, transfiguring and glorifying the natural man, taking the scornful curl from the lip, dwelling with meek wisdom in the eye. Here is the one rarest pearl which we seek, the principle of reconciliation with God, with ourselves, with our brethren, the abiding Spirit, the eternal Life.

Chapter VIII

THE PARABLE OF THE DRAG-NET

Matthew xiii. 47-50.

THE incident of this parable, like that of so many others, may have been suggested by an actual occurrence. As Jesus addressed the multitude on the shore, his eye may have fallen on a group of fishermen engaged in sorting what they had drawn in with their net; and while he sat in the house with his disciples, he may have thought how closely that net resembled the kingdom which he preached, gathering in all kinds of men, and so rendering it necessary in the future to separate the good from the bad. The net in question is shown by the original word to have been a drag-net; and it is important to remember this in order to appreciate the full force of the comparison. The drag-nets then, as now, were made of immense length, so as to enclose a considerable extent of water. Corks were attached at intervals to one side, and leaden weights to the other, so as to retain them in a vertical position. When they had been stretched out through the water, the two ends were gradually brought together, and the nets dragged ashore, bringing

with them whatever fish they had surrounded, including, as a matter of course, a considerable number unfit for food. The fishermen then sat down, and picking out the good fishes put them into suitable vessels, and threw the bad away. We must not forget, also, how appropriate was such a comparison addressed to men many of whom were themselves fishermen, and all of whom must have been familiar with every detail of the trade.

In the interpretation of the parable it is commonly assumed that the kingdom of heaven denotes the visible Christian Church; and if this explanation be correct, the parable contains an important truth, and one which, if Jesus contemplated founding a church, it was natural that he should at the time enforce. His preaching had powerfully stirred the popular mind, and great multitudes eagerly followed him under more or less mistaken impressions. It was necessary to repress false expectations, and make the people clearly understand that outward profession would be of no avail, but men would be accepted or rejected on the sole ground of their righteousness or wickedness. Here we have an important principle. Every religious organization is liable to gather within its pale a number of men who care nothing for the obligations of religion, but believe that their outward attachment to a Church will in some way secure their salvation. Jesus opposes this ecclesiastical reliance. Man is not secure because the kingdom of heaven has entangled him like a net. Observe, he does not attempt to adjudicate between the claims of rival churches. He does not say, this one is true, and that false; here you will be safe, there you will

perish everlastingly. He supposes the case of men belonging to the very kingdom of heaven, swept into it from the world's great sea, and closed in by it on every side; and declares that attachment even to so grand a church as this will form no ground for their acceptance. Every man will be taken or left on account of what he is, not on account of the network of events and associations which surround him.

The tendency in human nature which is here exposed is not confined to one or two powerful churches, but is of almost universal prevalence. We seem to have a natural predisposition to imagine that the little knot of religionists to which we belong constitutes the kingdom of heaven, and that we possess a peculiar merit in being members of such a society. It requires an effort of thought to disentangle ourselves from party associations, and remember that we must stand solitary before him who has no respect of persons, and who will not ask whether we have been born in England or in China, whether we have been conservative or advanced theologians, but whether we have used faithfully the opportunities which he has given us, and whether we have persistently upheld the eternal laws revealed in the conscience against all sectarian pretensions, and sought to glorify him rather than ourselves or our party. It would be well if we frequently laid this to heart. No religious connexion, no church patronage, no dissenting or neological independence, can reverse the impartial verdict of heaven. The divinest kingdom of all will collect together men of every kind, affording them indeed rare privileges, noble opportunities for doing good and serving the cause

of truth, but thereby increasing responsibility, and rendering judgment, not laxer, but more stringent. Not the name of Christ, but only his Spirit can redeem.

Such is a fair interpretation of the parable. But it seems to me that it may have a deeper import than this. Jesus nowhere defines the kingdom of heaven; but from his treatment of the subject we have come to regard it not simply as an ideal society, or an organization for the maintenance of religion, but as the reign of goodness and truth in the human heart; and in giving this sense to the phrase he does not seem to have departed from Jewish usage.[1] Accepting the words in this significance, we may discern a more comprehensive meaning in the parable, one not opposed to that already explained, but including it, and giving rise to yet more solemn reflection. The kingdom of heaven gathers of every kind. Is it not here intimated that goodness and truth visit all sorts and conditions of men, and ask for their allegiance? It would be a small thing to be included by the accident of birth within the pale of even the holiest church, if her lessons never struck a responsive chord in our souls.

What though words of maturest wisdom fall upon the outward ear, if there be no heart within to tell the meaning of those words? The sublime form of truth wins no reverence from the brute, and the reptile's blood never warms into admiration for self-sacrificing goodness. To many a dull mind the mighty voices of nature bear no record of

[1] For my own view of this whole subject the reader may consult my *Hibbert Lectures*, Lecture iv., on 'The Kingdom of God.' See also the Chapter on 'Thy Kingdom come.'

eternal things, and the lavish beauty of creation touches no sentiment of worship. And so the very tones of Christ might reverberate around us, and stir no new emotion; or a chorus of angels chant their hymn of praise, and lift us no nearer to God. But in such a case could we legitimately be spoken of as included in the kingdom of heaven simply because we happened to have a pew at a church, or to subscribe a portion of our income to a charitable scheme? If men were created unsusceptible to religious impression, and it were impossible for them to feel any interest in truth, or to appreciate the nobility of goodness, it would surely be idle to consider them as comprised within God's kingdom, and reproach them with abusing their opportunities, on the ground that a religious organization had taken them under its protection, and striven in vain to awaken a life alien to their nature. Before it can be justly said that the kingdom has gathered men into its fold, the springs of their religious life must have been reached, they must have been made conscious of a better and a worse, of a true and a false, and must have owned at least for a moment that the service of God is grander than all earthly aims. The holy images that look in upon the soul, and claim its adoration; the self-denying heroism that makes the cheeks tingle with an admiring sympathy; the words that burn into the conscience, and cause it to glow with shame; the counsels that compress the lips in the firmness of resolve; the unexpected joys that arouse our grateful emotion; the sorrows which from their very poignancy awaken the spirit of resignation—these are the kingdom of heaven sweeping its net around us, and claiming us for a diviner destiny.

Such impulses come to men of every grade. None has been cast in so mean a mould as to be wholly insensible to spiritual truth, a stranger to the monitions of conscience, regardless of the sadness and hollowness of this mortal life if it be only mortal. Each man has his solemn moments when he feels the meshes of the kingdom enfolding him, when something higher than self seems in contact with his soul, and something more inward and authoritative than passion tells him that he might be nobler. Philosophers may suppose that wisdom deigns to speak to them alone. Those who trust in the pride of wealth may be sceptical of those treasures of feeling which often enrich the houses of the poor. But God's kingdom recognizes no such distinctions; it gathers of every kind. The half-clad, deserted wife, as she stands weeping by the corpse of her last loved child, may know how blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. The sufferer who languishes in long-deferred hope of his departure can tell you how faith makes every pain endurable, and brightens the weary hours. Even those who have tasted the bitterness of sin are not forgotten. A holy breath still fans their cheeks. A memory of childish days, innocent and happy, invites them to return; a remorseful dread bids them pause. God is pleading with these his wandering children. Despised by men, despaired of by themselves, he cannot forsake them, but extends around them the net of his kingdom, and asks them even yet to choose the better part.

But, it may be asked, if this be the meaning of the kingdom of heaven, what room is left for the final separation of the bad from the good? Are not those already good, and true children of the

kingdom, who are animated by higher impulses, who feel the sanctity of life, and acknowledge the authority of a Divine law? Is it not impossible that those should be ignominiously expelled from the sacred precincts, whose hearts have known the beauty of devotion, and beat in sympathy with sound principle and generous deeds? Ah! no; for may not a man prove faithless to his highest thought? How is it that we will not learn that these things are *in* us, but not *of* us? The voice that speaks to us in so calm a tone of authority is not our own. The devout emotion that trembles through our frame is not of our creation. Those beauteous pictures which fascinate our eyes, and woo our purest aspiration, are not the work of our fingers. No; but the formative Spirit of God is brooding over our dark and chaotic souls, seeking to bring order out of confusion, and turn our earthly dust into his own image. And therefore our high musings, our clear discernment of right and wrong, our deep and tender feelings, tell us of his mercy, not of our goodness. These are the foundations on which duty rests, but not the superstructure of a strong and consistent character.

Man's probation begins with his knowledge of higher truths. Reveal to him no spiritual world, and you cannot blame him for being subservient to the physical. And, on the contrary, if the spiritual be vividly present to his soul, his responsibility is, in proportion to that vividness, increased. The apprehension of Divine laws furnishes, not the measure of our worth, but the standard of our obligation. And hence it is that, even in the deeper sense which I have described, men may be included in the kingdom of heaven, and yet

necessitate their own final expulsion. Man is the temple of the Holy Spirit; but if anyone defile that temple, him will God destroy. God cannot dwell for ever in a polluted sanctuary, but must at last withdraw, and leave it to its decay. It is well that we should receive a timely warning of these things; for the temptation which is here exposed is one of the most subtle that can assail the human heart.

Only a vulgar mind can rest its faith in externals, and suppose that the gorgeous drapery of a church can hide from view the impurity of the soul. But minds of finer growth may be deceived by their generous impulses, their warm affections, their enthusiastic faith. They confound these things with moral principle. They imagine them the offspring of their own spiritual force, and perceive not that they are angel visitors, who, if they be not hospitably entertained, will soon depart. They forget that conscience must sit severely on its judgment-seat, rebuking all laxity of obedience, and declaring that to whom much is given, of him will much be required. The cross cannot be escaped. The rapture which bears us to the third heaven will not pluck away the thorn in the flesh. Man's nobility consists, not in his high feelings, for these belong to God, but in his self-denial for the sake of his purest inspirations, for that is the man's own deed. It was not 'flesh and blood' that revealed to Peter the Divine soul of Christ; it was a light breaking upon him from the Father; but does that lessen or aggravate the guilt of his denial? The good are those who follow with unvarying fidelity the leading of the Spirit; the bad are those who know the better and pursue the worse. Whatever instinctive nobleness of dis-

position they may have had, they must at last be separated from the just; and the word which they have listened to and approved will rise up in the judgment against them.

This judgment is described indefinitely as taking place at the end of the world, or, more properly, of the age. There are those who assume to be wise in regard to the times and seasons which the Father has kept in his own power; but it seems to me that we only indulge in a vain curiosity, and divert our attention from the main lesson of the parable, by entering into a discussion of topics which eternity alone can reveal. I cannot suppose that Christ was commissioned to disclose mere matters of fact in regard to the future, but to unfold the great laws by which the moral government of the world is regulated; and his descriptions of final judgment may be only the costume in which he clothes a spiritual truth, so as to present it forcibly to the imagination. So, here, the points for us to attend to are not the date of the judgment, or the execution of the sentence by angels, but the separation of the wicked from the just, and the expulsion of the former from the kingdom. These represent to us important laws, which we see already in operation, and which may be carried out with more marked effect in the future.

The bad have a repugnance to the good. There is that within each which creates a severance, and fixes a great gulf between them. Men spontaneously form themselves into groups, of which the combining power is an inward communion. If there be no sympathy passing between soul and soul, society will be a heap of unrelated atoms, waiting only for the touch of circumstance to break

it into antagonistic elements. There is a worse separation than that which we denote by time and space. The want of mutual understanding and trust is a more formidable barrier than the slow-paced years or the angry ocean. And this is one of the most awful punishments of sin, that it creates an aversion to the highest and noblest minds, makes heaven intolerable, and bars from any real intercourse with the wise and good more effectually than prison walls and iron doors. And may not this absorption in self proceed till the soul shall lose all faith in God or man, and walk through perpetual solitude, alone in the midst of crowds, alone with its mocking guilt? So shall it be at the end of the world. There is a communion of saints; of the wicked, there is no communion.

As sin separates us from the good, so, too, it casts us away from the inward kingdom of heaven. Under its malignant power the vision of a spiritual creation fades, our warm affections become chilled and calculating, our pure desires cease to glow, and we live without hope and without God. Every unfaithful act tends to this consummation. We cannot insult the revelations of God, and expect them to appear again in the same clearness and beauty. Sin blinds the eyes and stops the ears of the soul, and leaves only the memory of a departed glory. Thus it always tends to bring about its own punishment, separating the wicked not only from among the just, but from that realm of goodness whose laws thay have discarded. But those, on the other hand, who accept the Divine call, and take upon themselves the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, shall be gathered into the communion of the blessed, and shine as the stars for ever and ever.

Chapter IX

THE PARABLE OF THE TEN VIRGINS

Matthew xxv. 1-13.

THE marriage ceremonies of the East differ so widely from those prevalent among ourselves that a brief consideration of them is necessary to the complete understanding of this parable. The wedding was celebrated at night; and its principal feature consisted in the removal of the bride from her father's house to that of the bridegroom. Late in the evening the bridegroom, attired in festal dress, set out for the house of the bride, accompanied by his groomsmen, 'the children of the bride-chamber,' and preceded by a band of musicians and torchbearers. The bride, apparelled in an ample veil or light robe, and attended by her young friends, answering to our bridesmaids, awaited his coming. The bridegroom, having arrived, conducted the bride and her companions to his own home 'with gladness and rejoicing.'[1] On the way the procession was joined by a number of maidens, the virgins of the parable, who, lamp in hand, took their places in the party, and went

[1] See *Psalm* xlv.

to the bridegroom's house, where the nuptial feast was prepared.

In proceeding to the interpretation of the parable we encounter the usual difficulty of determining precisely to what extent the language was meant to be symbolical. This is a question about which it is impossible to lay down any strict rules, and which must therefore be left to the judgment and good sense of each reader. The disposition to attach a spiritual meaning to every little circumstance may be carried to such an extreme as to overlay the real significance with a mass of trifling speculations; and, on the other hand, we may so confine ourselves to the main lesson which the parable is designed to express as to pass by unnoticed many of the more delicate shades of spiritual truth. As an example of the former mode of interpretation, not to mention other instances, the oil and the lamps have been adduced as an evidence on both sides of the controversy between faith and works; and the fact that the oil was sold by a definite class of dealers has been construed into an argument in favour of a paid ministry. It seems to me that such matters, whatever may be their intrinsic importance, are so remote from the object of the parable as to forbid the supposition that Jesus referred to them. It is often, indeed, easy to apply the imagery of a parable to a subject beside the original purpose; but we must not therefore suppose that there was a secret reference to such an application. In the present instance it may be quite appropriate to compare a good deed to a lamp, and the spiritual grace which sustains the fire of goodness to the oil which feeds the flame; but it does not follow that in a passage the leading

object of which is to inculcate a vigilant prudence these comparisons were designed. Our best security against error is to keep firm hold of the central idea; and then we shall have less difficulty in determining what portions of the parable really illustrate this, and what circumstances are added simply to present a more complete picture of the event described. It seems clear that the comparison is between the *conduct* of the virgins in a case of ordinary life and the conduct of many in their spiritual concerns. But though the respective conduct may be similar, it does not follow that there need be any resemblance between the persons engaged or the circumstances under which they exhibit their character. Thus the virgins need not remind us of a nunnery, nor the cry at midnight fix the precise hour at which the Messiah is to return. It will involve us in the grossest errors if we forget that two sets of objects may bear the same mutual relation, though there is no resemblance between the objects themselves, and a comparison of them beyond the limits of the specified relation would be quite unsound. To take an obvious example: Jesus compares his love for his people to that of a shepherd for his sheep, a comparison which, in the East, was suggestive of the happiest relations; but it is easy to see that the likeness between men and sheep might be pushed to an absurd extreme. The resemblance ceases the moment you depart from the relation which furnishes the ground of comparison. A regard for this simple principle would have saved interpreters from many mistakes in the exposition of the parables. Adopting it as a caution for ourselves, let us endeavour to draw

forth the spiritual lesson of the parable of the virgins.

It appears evident that the warning is intended for those who have already professed their loyal attachment to the kingdom of heaven, and so repeats in another form a lesson which we have already derived from the parable of the drag-net. In the preceding portion of his discourse Jesus had drawn a distinction between the faithful and the unfaithful, and declared that on those who deliberately neglected their duties, and violated the laws of God, retribution, however far off they might imagine it, would come with sudden and fearful power. But among the faithful themselves differences may be found, and some of them may act in such a manner as to be excluded from the highest blessedness. Possibly some of us may suppose that we have so seriously devoted ourselves to God, and so resolutely determined to do that which is right and good, that denunciations of punishment do not concern us. But here a more subtle danger is pointed out, and the dutiful are exhorted to an increased thoughtfulness and care.

If any man presumes upon his strict integrity, his high regard for purity of morals, or his unvarnished simplicity and unselfishness of character, the warning is to him. If any relies upon his fervid emotions, his vivid faith, or his generous and sympathetic impulses, the warning is to him. If any young soul, freshly touched with the spirit of devotion, believes that its love can never grow cold, that the will once surrendered, and filled with peace, can never reassert its own claims, or be disturbed by the passions of an unreconciled heart, to it the warning comes. The higher and

nobler we conceive ourselves to be, the more solemnly it becomes us to consider our position, and prepare for every emergency by which our spirits may be proved.

For of those virgins who awaited the glad procession five were wise, and brought with their lamps a supply of oil for any unforeseen contingency; but five were foolish, and left themselves without the means of replenishing their lamps. Thus, in regard to the spiritual life we may be guilty of a kindred folly by neglecting to use the means which are requisite to maintain its purity and strength. We are apt to imagine that the spiritual life will take care of itself, and does not require any special culture upon our part. We desire to do right; but how many minutes in the day do we reserve for the consideration of our duty, for the devout consecration of ourselves to its performance, and for the review of our conduct in the light of Christian principle? We wish our feelings to retain their freshness and purity; but how often do we examine our hearts, and scrutinize our motives, with the fixed purpose of checking whatever we find wrong within? We would not have our faith quenched, or lose our hold of God and immortality; but how often do we bow down in the stillness of prayer, and listen for those higher voices which we suffer to be stifled amid the world's noise? How little does religion enter seriously into our thoughts as forming an essential branch in the education of ourselves and our children. Doubtless we desire all who are dear to us to be good and honourable men and women, with clear principles of action, and hearts equal to any crisis; and yet, while we spare no expense or self-denial

in cultivating the intellectual and business faculties, we give ourselves but small trouble about religion, and treat the soul, which we call immortal, as if it merited only the most languid and careless attention.

Do we suppose that passion requires no direction or that conscience is such a vast and irresistible power that without our training and vigilance it will grow to a Christlike stature? Can we pretend that the world presents no attractions to try the strongest, or that the life of faith in this age of shifting opinions is so easy that we have simply to leave it to itself? Surely it is far otherwise. No great character can be formed by chance. Christian devotion, which implies intensity of purpose, depth and purity of feeling, and that trustful surrender of all things to the disposal of God which is the highest exercise of the will, never can be ours if we do not seek it, and foster whatever portion of it we possess with daily thought and prayer. The neglect of spiritual culture may coexist with honourable intentions, and a sincere respect for the obligations of religion. But it is *folly*, folly of which we should be ashamed in any other interest, and of which we shall some day bitterly repent.

'While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.' The danger here indicated is the reverse of that which is described in regard to the unfaithful servant.[1] The bad man flatters himself that judgment is far distant, for his lord delayeth his coming; but the judgment comes quickly, in an hour that he is not aware of. The good, on the contrary, are disposed to make a brilliant preparation, which will not endure through

[1] Matt. xxiv. 48-51.

the tedious delays of life. Had the bridegroom arrived at an earlier hour, all the virgins would have appeared equally ready; but in the lapse of time during which no special duties were required of them, the lamps slowly burned themselves out; and when the decisive moment came, those who had provided no further supply of oil found themselves unprepared. Thus, if our faith were put to the proof in its freshest zeal, it might be adequate to carry us through any trial. But the weary sameness of life, which proceeds on its course day after day without making any urgent demands on our piety, wears down the faith of those who believe that religion requires no continued culture. There are long periods during which nothing occurs to excite us, when no great sorrow or pressing duty wakens the whole power of the soul, but it is easy to fulfil the moral proprieties, and life is a smooth and pleasant way. Such periods are a sort of spiritual sleeping-time when it is difficult to distinguish the varieties existing among the good, and the wise and the foolish, the strong and the weak, appear to move upon the same commonplace level. But let some coming of the Lord waken every man to his full energy, let some trial arise which needs all the resources of faith, and vast distinctions will immediately become apparent.

The prudent and thoughtful, who have sedulously attended to the means of rendering their religion not only brilliant, but enduring, will manifest their greatness, while the foolish and careless must bewail their expiring hopes, and discover, when too late, that an outward and untempted respectability is no pledge of religious depth or force of character. If any man, then, rejoices in the brightness of his

thoughts or the transparent purity of his life, and thinks that these, without any care on his part, will endure through distant and unknown trials, let him pause and reflect, or he may have to lament the flickering flame which he knows not how to revive. Let the young especially be warned. For often in the rapt devotion of youth it seems as if all pains could be borne, all temptations be resisted, all passions regulated, all self-denial welcomed, in the power of that love which burns towards God. But oh! how little do we know our own hearts. That fire has been kindled in the soul, that we may tend it with untiring care; but through neglect it becomes cold and dim. Slowly and stealthily the world gathers a night-chill round us; and when at last a cry is heard which compels us in an instant to seek the light of faith, we find to our horror that it is not there.

In this extremity we may turn, like the foolish virgins, to our wiser companions, entreating their assistance. But that which we most need they cannot supply. They may favour us with sound advice; but character no man can give us. That is an endowment which we must win by our own thought and exertion. We cannot, in the spiritual world, appropriate the fruits of another's labour, and transfer to our careless and indolent souls the rich experience, the enlarged sympathies, the firm trust, or the indomitable conscientiousness, which our brother has gained by continuous toil. Yet how prone are men to cling to this delusive hope. How often, when the lamp of life is burning low, are ministers of religion called in, not as sympathizing friends who can best speak the needed words, but as though their presence or their prayers

could atone for former error and neglect. That repentance, if genuine, will be accepted at any moment we cannot doubt. But neither the prayers of a priest nor the tears of a penitent can blot out the irrevocable past. The consequences can be removed, if at all, only by persevering effort. If we are disappointed and fretful because the effects of our past foolishness meet us at every turn, we have not yet made a sincere beginning. The will must resign itself, and meekly accept its cross. By daily vigilance, by careful thought, by earnest prayer we must purchase the Christian character, and not faithlessly repine because our own lack of wisdom and diligence has prevented us from attaining the highest good.

For this is the consequence of spiritual folly. The improvident virgins are not described as severely punished. We hear not now of wailing and gnashing of teeth. But they experience the inevitable result of their own conduct: they are excluded from the banquet. And so the result of that folly which leads us to neglect the cultivation of our best faculties will follow by an inflexible law. We may not be exposed to the severest penalties that await the guilty; but we shall be excluded, by the very necessity of the case, from the highest forms of character and faith. We shall not be prepared to take our places in the communion of the holy, or to sit down at the great spiritual banquet with the wise and noble of every age. The hero; the martyr; the conqueror of temptation; those whose lips scorned the slightest paltering with truth; those who would have parted with a hand or an eye sooner than do wrong; the prophet, with his clear vision of eternal laws; the saint,

with his calm confidence in a Father's love; the benevolent, who have taken upon themselves the yoke, that they might bless their brothers; the sufferers, who have bowed their heads to the higher Will, and found consoling angels in the very sorrows from which they shrank—all are there, having each attained some pre-eminent distinction by his care and patience.

Can we expect to join this august company, if, a few minutes' attention to religion fatigues us and we deem the majesty of the Christian life worthy of only a passing and familiar salute? Will not the Lord of that assembly declare that he knows us not, while our puny and untutored souls confess with bitterness that it is too true? What resemblance do we bear to him whose will was one with God's, and who discovered that the cross was the secret of everlasting life? Oh! let none trifle with their own souls, or think they can be entrusted to a wild and accidental growth. We must strive to feel that Christian character is a reality, and that all diligence should be given to make it our own. Let us not be deceived by the apparent easiness of life. Many an unexpected temptation or heart-breaking sorrow is before us. Sooner or later what we really are shall be severely tested, and we shall be assigned a place, not only in accordance with our righteousness or wickedness, but in conformity with our wisdom or our folly, which will either enroll us among the noblest of earth's children, or shut us out from the highest attainment and the purest graces. 'Watch, therefore; for ye know neither the day nor the hour.'

Chapter X

THE TALENTS AND THE POUNDS

Matthew xxv. 14-30; *Luke* xix. 12-27.

THE Parable of the Pounds has such an obvious parallelism to that of the Talents that, notwithstanding considerable differences, we may fairly treat them as variations of the same theme, adapted to changing circumstances. In a commentary these would be pointed out; but as the practical lesson of the two parables is substantially the same, we may here confine our remarks to that of the talents.

This parable, like that of the ten virgins, bears evidence of social usages widely different from our own. The word rendered 'servant' might better be translated 'slave.' In ancient times it was common for slaves to be engaged in business, either paying their master a fixed annual sum, or carrying on their trade with his money and for his benefit. The latter is the case supposed in the parable. The master committed large sums of money to his slaves, and had every right to expect a profitable return.

The passage presents, under another aspect, the leading idea of the discourse of which it forms

a part, the necessity of a vigilant fidelity. But here the duty of watchfulness is subordinated, and the importance of a diligent and faithful use of the means entrusted to us is enforced. Men in their spiritual relations are described under the figure of slaves left, in the absence of their master, to act according to their own judgment. How exactly this represents our spiritual condition. It is true that the Lord of our conscience is always present, and is acquainted with every act at the very moment of its performance. But we apprehend this presence only through the power of faith, and seldom see it with the clearness of direct perception. It is not so obvious as to paralyse the free efforts of the will, as his master's eye awes even the indolent slave into submission. We may bury our talents in the earth without dread of his audible remonstrance; and the zealous fulfilment of duty may be a tribute of reverence to that which is right and holy, exempt alike from the constraint of fear and the hope of an immediate advantage. Thus our moral freedom and responsibility are preserved intact. In calm and meditative moments God's presence may appear so closely to enfold us as almost to absorb our human personality, and swallow up the lower in the higher will. But in general, while we still believe in it, and endeavour to maintain our consciousness of it, it is 'like a man travelling into a far country,' leaving us for a time, in order to test the sincerity of our principles and the firmness of our wills.

In this parable regard is paid to our 'several ability.' God commits to men trusts of varying character, to each that which is best suited to his capacities, or which is most adapted to develop

his spiritual energies. To none does he assign a task which it were fruitless to attempt, to none a mere play-work requiring no care and thoughtfulness to discharge. We have each serious duties to fulfil, duties which demand the exercise of vigilance, judgment, and self-denial, but which, nevertheless, we are competent to perform, and for the due accomplishment of which we shall be held responsible.

There is, however, a difference, which we can hardly avoid noticing, between our case and that supposed in the parable; for these human analogies fail to represent adequately our Divine relations. We have no 'natural' ability which has not been bestowed, no faculties which are not themselves talents to be used with wisdom and fidelity. By what rule of proportion are these determined? Why has one man received great, and another very small, abilities? Why is one called to fill a distinguished place in the world's history, and another destined to toil and suffer unknown? To such inquiries it is difficult to reply except in the language of Paul, 'Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus?' It may be absolutely essential, though we know not how, to the well-being of the universe that one should have his ten talents, and another only one; and even the idiot may have his appropriate place in the great system of things. The parable does not pretend to solve these questions; but it certainly suggests to us the conviction that there is a just proportion established among our various gifts, and that, whatever position we are designed to fill, talents have been entrusted to us adequate to its worthy occupancy; and if we fail, our failure

must be attributed, not to our unfortunate deficiencies, but to our culpable neglect.

Objections to this doctrine will readily occur to us on taking a superficial view of the world. Satirical moralists appear to consider it exactly the opposite of the truth, and to believe that most men are in the wrong places. They delight to imagine a vast amount of unknown worth and genius rudely trodden down by the hoof of society, while incompetency exults in all the pomp of rank and education. And some may be tempted to sigh over their own piteous lot, and say, 'Oh! that we had one talent more, and instead of pining here in obscurity, we should shake the world with the awe of our name.' One or two, with nobler ambition, may picture the amount of good they would accomplish, had they the five or the ten talents which have been denied them. Yet if any man will consult, with a reverent modesty, the oracles of faith within, he will confess that in his case at least the doctrine of the parable is true.

We need, not a change of fortune, but a change of resolution. When we submit all our desires and aims to the will of God, a wonderful beauty instantly overspreads our lot. Where there was contention and apparent want of fitness, there is now unity and mutual adaptation. Everything is disposed by infinite Wisdom; and we learn to feel, with Paul, that even our weakness and defects are necessary to the true balance of the system, and contribute to the strength and fullness of the spirit. Could we always feel thus, we should be saved from wasting our energies in fruitless and repining dreams; and we should lose our sourness over our own lot, and our cynical contempt for

the condition of others, in the sweetness and tenderness of Christian contentment, which is not a sullen acquiescence in what we cannot help, but a calm and joyous trustfulness that our mental, bodily, and worldly gifts are bestowed by a Wisdom and Love which cannot err.

As our several gifts are assigned to us, and our duties proportioned, by a higher Power, so too we shall be judged, not by the variety and extent of our attainments, but by the fidelity with which we exercise our abilities. Of the three servants who are mentioned two displayed an equal diligence in the employment of money entrusted to them; and though one had originally received, and in the conduct of his business acquired, more than twice as much as the other, the same commendation was bestowed upon each. They were desired to 'enter into the joy of their lord'—an expression which probably refers to a feast given by the master on his return, and in which the faithful slaves were invited to participate.

The words, 'Thou hast been faithful over a few things,' deserve our special attention. He who had had the widest field of labour committed to him, had, nevertheless, in his master's eyes, accomplished only a little. Regarded from the Divine point of view, how small are the grandest of human achievements. How insignificant a part, if we judge by outward results, do even the highest minds play in the history of the universe. And many a man, who lifts himself proudly among his contemporaries, or struts with pompous air amid a little knot of admirers—what is he? A bubble in a dashing torrent. How much unworthy fretfulness about the appreciation of our merits, how

much uncharitable contempt towards our neighbours, should we escape, if, instead of comparing ourselves with fellow servants, we judged of ourselves by the possible glories of an immortal spirit.

The very highest praise that man can win in the courts of heaven is that he has been faithful over a few things. Our stupid, illiterate brother, with his hard hands and his coarse raiment, may win the same, and sit down to meat with us in a Presence where 'he that exalteth himself shall be abased.' And, on the other hand, let none despond because his acquirements are small. He, too, occupies a Divine field, and, if he be faithful in the improvement of his few opportunities, he shall yet be appointed over many things, and, while he moves undistinguished among his fellow men, shall participate in the same love and the same joy. Did we truly believe that we are all held in the embrace of one Spirit, that we are each intended to fulfil some gracious purpose, and that, whether we are high or low in the scale of outward emolument, the same loving approval attends our goodness, we should nevermore either boast or murmur; but the highest would be clothed in that robe of humility which is the finest ornament of great endowments, and the lowest would maintain that quiet dignity which seldom fails to command respect.

Among the servants whose conduct is described one is selected for a more extended notice on account of his unfaithfulness. He 'went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money.' Let us endeavour to take a correct view of the nature of his offence. We must observe that it was wholly negative. He was reprimanded, not

for what he did, but for neglecting what he ought to have done. He represents, therefore, not those who have committed an enormous sin, but those who have wasted opportunities of usefulness, and squandered in indolence the hours which demanded their labour. We are thus taught that the Christian life is no torpid abstinence from crime, but a creative spirit of goodness. It rouses men to action, and knocks with loud remonstrance at the hearts of the supine and indifferent. A weak and purposeless amiability, which never augments its store of spiritual wealth, and is too lazy to appeal with any force to those with whom it is associated, will not be accepted as a true reflection of his spirit by him who desired men to take up their cross and follow him. It is not without reason, then, that the defaulter is described as the servant with one talent. For those who are endowed with great powers are more apt to misuse them than not to use them at all. Their temptations arise from the strength of passion, or ambition's false allurements; but the temptation to do nothing because there is so little that they can do besets minds of feebler nature and of more contracted sphere.

What is the excuse which these indolent ones offer for their conduct? 'I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed; and I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth; lo, there thou hast that is thine.' How little love there is in this answer; and, as is always the case where love is absent, how completely false the view which is taken. To the slothful and selfish portion of our nature duty appears as a

hard and thankless task. What avails it for us, we cry, to attempt to live by the Christian rule, poor, enslaved creatures as we are, ground down in bondage to this body, with its clamouring appetites and fierce passions, and placed in a world where every influence is hostile? Its height is inaccessible, its purity is designed for angels, its strict principle may be adapted to the courts of heaven; but here it would be madness to commit ourselves to the lofty teaching of Christ. We should only involve ourselves in failure, lose perhaps in rash adventure the particle of solid virtue that we possess, and bring down on our heads a ruthless punishment. No, we will shun the worst kinds of sin, and endeavour to render back undiminished the little that we have received.

Is there not that within us which tells us that this reasoning is false? Does it not spring from our gross and earth-born nature, and not from that ethereal spirit which allies us with higher worlds? Only let the angel of love descend into our souls, and instantly duty will relax her harsher features, and appear to us in radiant charms, and we shall see that every cross involves a resurrection and ascension to the right hand of God. Our Father asks, not for success, but fidelity; not for grand achievements, but the constancy of love. Blessed is the man of whom it may be truly said, he hath done what he could. There is no soul so mean as to be excluded from the range of God's paternal providence. We have each a work to do; and though with rude and bungling effort, we struggle on, God will never taunt us with inevitable short-comings, but accept as exceeding precious the sacrifice of our hearts, and our humble devotion to his will.

Applying this excuse, not to the general tenor of our conduct, but to some special instance, how often do we make our unfitness an apology for rendering no active support to a work of Christian beneficence. Such an apology may indeed be made in a very different spirit from that of the slothful servant; and occasionally it may be only the part of wisdom to reserve all our energy for some other pursuit. But is there not frequently a great deal of self-deception in such excuses? Is there not often a stronger motive behind, which is ashamed to show its face? Let us be honest with ourselves; and if indolence or indifference hold us back, let us not attempt to shuffle off the blame from ourselves, and lay it on our Creator. And so far as this plea of unfitness is urged in sincerity, we ought to remember that, though we had ten thousand talents, we still should be unfit. Indeed no man is even approximately fit for any Christian work till he feels that he is unfit. His strength, his light, his wisdom, must be caught from communion with a higher than self. He who calls us to speak and to do will not leave us alone. As soon as we feel that of our own selves we can do nothing, we find that in him we can do all things. As soon as we own that our unclean lips cannot speak, a word not our own comes forth with a Divine authority. There is an infinite power in the speech and the deed of a consecrated soul; and the poverty which dedicates its all to God becomes rich with heavenly treasure.

Now we come, in conclusion, to the sentence pronounced upon the slothful servant. The proffered apology is made the ground of condemnation. If he was afraid to employ the money himself,

he might at least have handed it over to others who would have turned it to good account. If we are sincerely distrustful of our own power, there are always men to be found who by their wisdom and experience can assist us to utilize our one talent. But if we are wicked and slothful, nothing remains but that the talent should be taken from us, and given to one who has proved that he will use it faithfully. Opportunities which we will not improve slip away, and are lost for ever. Posts of honourable work, which we only clog with our presence, pass into more diligent hands. The intellect which knows not the tension of thought becomes relaxed and torpid. Conscience without self-denial sinks into lethargy. Devotion which lounges in self-indulgence freezes into formalism. On every faculty this law is written, 'from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.' In no high sense can we be said to have that which we never use. The miser is poor and wretched as a beggar in the midst of his hoards; and genius without exertion is more pitiful than stupidity. But by slow decay the unused talent disappears, till even our imaginary title to possession is taken away. And the unprofitable servant is cast into outer darkness, to weep at the results of his own guilt.

We do not like this darkness of the soul, this wailing of the condemned who find the doors of heaven closed against them. But can it be otherwise? Shall we expect to see if we close our eyes, or to win the race if we spend all our days upon a couch? And yet shall we believe that wisdom, righteousness, truth, and love will be ours if we bury them in the earth? Heaven is not a place

where the indolent and careless and self-indulgent are crushed in with undiscriminating fondness, but the transcendent excellence of spiritual endowments, the clear-eyed faith, the meek devotion, the earnest thought, the practical judgment, the self-denying righteousness, the simplicity of love, which belong only to those who know full well the strain of exertion and the hardships of duty. They alone who follow after these things shall hear the blessed words, 'well done, good and faithful servant.'

Chapter XI

THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SONS

Matthew xxi. 28-30.

THE Parable of the two Sons and that of the wicked husbandmen are not expressly introduced as parables of the kingdom of heaven; but the subsequent application shows that they were so intended, and they form a group with that of the marriage feast, which is preceded by the familiar formula. We may therefore treat them in succession as intended to represent different aspects of the kingdom. In a certain sense, indeed, this is true of all the parables; but those in which the comparison is directly indicated naturally fall into a distinct class.

The original bearing of the parable of the two sons does not require much consideration. Jesus was now on his final visit to Jerusalem, and the opposition between him and the religious world of that day was fast drawing to a crisis. He had just entered the city in triumph, heralded by the plaudits of a vast procession, and, without consulting any of the authorities, had at once begun to exercise his spiritual power by clearing away some of the abuses which desecrated the temple pre-

cincts. The enthusiasm of the people was unbounded; and even children shouted 'Hosanna to the son of David.' The Sanhedrin was in alarm; its authority was openly disregarded, and the populace were in a state of dangerous excitement. Who could tell that the attention of the Romans might not soon be drawn to the prevailing fanaticism, and complications arise which would end in the destruction of the Jewish polity? In justice to the chief priests and elders we may suppose that they were influenced not only by envy and religious intolerance, but also by the instinctive aversion of the higher classes of society to any enthusiastic movement, and by the natural slowness of the official mind to appreciate exceptional cases. Be this as it may, they felt the necessity of adopting prompt measures in order to turn the tide of popular feeling. As it might have been perilous, in existing circumstances, to manifest any open hostility they determined in the first instance simply to question the authority by which Jesus acted.

They may have hoped to drive him either to a virtual admission that his conduct was unjustifiable, as possessing no legal sanction, or to an explicit declaration of his messiahship, which would have made it competent for them to investigate his claims, and perhaps have furnished them with a plausible ground for a charge of blasphemy. They were destined, however, soon to find themselves foiled with their own weapons. Jesus, availing himself of an admitted privilege, instead of immediately answering their question, proposed one to them, 'The baptism of John, was it from heaven or of men?' They were thus placed

in a disagreeable dilemma. If they admitted the prophetic claims of John the Baptist, Jesus could upbraid them with their unbelief; and if they denied those claims, they would exasperate the people against themselves, and raise Jesus higher than ever in popular estimation. They could escape the difficulty only by avowing their inability to answer—a retreat which must have made them look foolish in the eyes of the bystanders, and gave Jesus the right of refusing to answer their question. But their humiliation was not yet over. They had to listen to the parable of the two sons, and acknowledge that the obedient one, though rude and contradictory in speech, did his father's will rather than the one who was so ready with his professions, but neglected orders. Then followed the severe words, 'Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not; but the publicans and the harlots believed him; and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him.'

The parable, though thus accompanied by a special application, and conceived in reference to the existing condition of society, nevertheless contains a lesson for all ages. The names of sects may change, and occupations be differently regarded in public estimation; but the great varieties of character and principle reappear from generation to generation. Pharisee no longer suggests to us the extreme of moral strictness and religious sanctity, and tax-gatherer has ceased to be a term of opprobrium; but we may still roughly divide society into those who make a profession of religion

and those who openly disregard its claims. On each of these classes the parable suggests a few remarks.

By the son who so curtly refused to obey his father's directions are represented those who consciously and defiantly set themselves in opposition to a good and religious life. It may deserve notice that Christ does not speak of publicans and sinners as though they owed their degradation to ignorance, the pressure of circumstances, or misguided innocence. They, too, had received a call to something higher, and the opportunity had been presented to them of dignifying their humble lot by doing God service. There is no soul from which the light of God has been for ever hidden, none which sinks down to perdition without its own guilt. It may be well, for the sake of charity in our judgment of individual cases, to take into account the force of temptation and deficiency of culture; but it is not well to ascribe the sin of any class to the arrangement of providence. To the low as well as to the high the command is given, 'Go, work to-day in my vineyard,' and only the power of replying even to the commands of God, 'I will not,' can explain the mystery of human sin. Those who imagine that Christ treats the offences of publicans and harlots with a 'startling leniency'[1] would do well to remember that he here ascribes to such persons, prior to their repentance, as distinct and offensive a rebellion as words can easily convey.

The rude son, however, afterwards repented and went. A tendency is occasionally manifested to palliate vice as only a weakness, which is always

[1] Miss Cobbe, *Christian Ethics and the Ethics of Christ.*

on the verge of repentance. Unfortunately human nature is exposed by weakness, by deficiency, that is, in heart and conscience, and in all the nobler and more manly elements of character, to serious lapses; and because a general feeling of good humour is compatible with self-indulgence, men readily deceive themselves, and think their frailties are excusable. So far from its being necessary or desirable to relax the severity of conscience in regard to such frailties it seems to me almost the one point where the public conscience requires to be invigorated, that the whole force of general opinion may be brought to bear on the weakness of individuals. Nothing so saps and degrades the character as the indulgence in any form of vice; and it is the sign of a weak and degenerate age when we insinuate doctrines of self-indulgence instead of teaching men to be stern with themselves, and to lay a heavy and authoritative hand upon all the demands of their lower nature. Christ himself, with all his compassion for the sinful, teaches on this point no doubtful or hesitating doctrine—'If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee; for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.' And in the parable under consideration he not only says nothing to palliate the offences of publicans and sinners, but he nowhere intimates that they had any peculiar susceptibility to repentance. He simply alludes to the fact that they had repented at the preaching of John, while others, whose religious professions would have led one to expect something better, remained impenitent, and were less prepared even than they to enter upon a higher and purer form

of religious life. The fact that they were more readily moved than the pharisaical party by the appeals of the Baptist may perhaps be explained by the following considerations.

In the first place, they retained more of the simplicity of nature, and their healthy feelings and sympathies were more easily touched. There seems to be a tendency in culture, if not to deaden, at least to encrust the instincts of unsophisticated nature. With true culture it may be that the feelings lie deeper, and do not manifest themselves so openly, but are in reality richer and more tender. But under a less perfect training they often become callous; their native tones are seldom heard and little understood; artificial feelings are created, and conventional standards of judgment assumed. A portion of society which had entered upon this stage of culture, and found, as it imagined, something more polite and civilized than the beautiful emotions and sympathies which God has planted in the heart, would be little attracted by the preaching of John.

That roughly dressed and ill-fed man, with his plain speech and strong denunciation, crying aloud in the wilderness against the iniquity of his people, would seem to the sleek and respectable attenders at the synagogue, with their regular fasts and their punctually paid tithes, little better than a lunatic; and as they discussed his merits over some sumptuous entertainment the opinion would easily prevail that he was possessed with a demon. That he was carried away by the supernatural force and clearness of his conscience, and by mingled pity and indignation at the hollowness and sin of his countrymen was an untenable supposition. The

case was very different with those who had long scorned the ordinances of religion, and allowed nature to have its own wild way. To them he appeared as a man who was all earnestness, a religious teacher who actually meant and believed to the very centre of his being every word he said. His tones seemed to reach and waken something that had long slept in the heart. Olden days rose up in the memory; a bright and innocent child, and now a despised outcast, and the trumpet of the last great judgment already pealing through the conscience; a mother's imploring tears; a father's warning; the misery that had secretly been gnawing the heart through all that mad dance of pleasure. How truly that voice in the wilderness pierced the hidden recesses of the soul. Many a poor sinner bowed his head under its spell, and went away baptized in the waters of repentance.

It may seem paradoxical to say that another cause of the repentance of this class of persons was the very grossness of their sins. It is essential to repentance that we feel fully and deeply that we have actually sinned; and it is far easier to feel this in regard to flagrant breaches of the moral law than in relation to those more subtle forms of sin which it is difficult to classify, and of which the law can take no cognizance. The people who were moved by the preaching of John knew full well that they were sinners, and what they needed was to have the odious nature of sin impressed upon them, and to have their moral and religious feelings awakened. But the Pharisee did not think that he required any repentance. The sin that defiled his heart had disguised itself as an angel of light. All his faults were clothed in the names of virtues.

His bigotry was zeal; his narrowness was love of truth; his contempt of others was hatred of sin; his formalism was religious earnestness; his devouring widows' houses was justice. No conviction could have a greater difficulty in gaining access to his mind than that he and the publican stood before God upon the same level, and had the same need of repentance. What wonder, then, that the publican, who saw himself in as dark colours as truth required, repented and entered the kingdom of heaven before the self-complacent Pharisee in whose fair-seeming heart sin lurked with dangerous concealment.

By the son whose obsequious promise was followed by disobedience are represented those who say, and do not. So far as the profession alone is concerned the comparison extends to all who presumably lead a religious life. The multitudes who flock week by week to the various places of worship are all in effect saying continually, 'We go, Lord.' Out of these multitudes a certain number, it is to be feared, frequent the house of prayer merely under the pressure of fashion or of worldly interest. Of these we need only say that they would do well to reflect on the danger and impiety of enacting such hypocrisy before high heaven. Our thoughts, at present, however, regard a more subtle evil.

There is an hypocrisy, not thus rude and vulgar, but of more delicate growth; not intentionally deceptive; believing in the purity of its own motives, and the holiness of its religion, but having no genuineness or transparency. Perhaps it would be more correct to describe it as a state of unreality than as hypocrisy. It is a state in which men

assume for the time, or think they assume, feelings which are not the spontaneous outgrowth of their hearts. They approve of devotion, and see the propriety of thankfulness, and almost believe that they are devout and thankful, while in reality they are worldly and discontented. This is a condition into which we are in danger of falling owing to the very regularity of our religious observances. Our weekly worship, which ought to be the light and strength of our daily life, and to raise our souls to higher thoughts and more worthy aims, may become a blind which screens from us our own deformity, and makes us believe ourselves religious when our hearts are far from God.

'We go, Lord' is often in our mouths; but do our deeds correspond to our words, at least so far as the outward man can imperfectly realize the Divine ideal in his soul? Religion, which brings before us the infinite and eternal, and is full of mystery and wonder, transcending our subtlest thought, and apprehended only by our devout worship, perpetually renews its call, 'Go, work to-day.' But men have narrowed it to their own paltry measure. Professing to revere and follow the truth, they have stoned its prophets and bound its martyrs to the stake. The cold, proud heart is closed against the appeal of any higher sanctity; and when a kingdom of heaven is proclaimed, it will not enter, but looks scornfully on while publicans and harlots fling their sins aside, and press forward to adore their Father's forgiving love. Let us, then, watch for the dawning of a more glorious light, that we may continually see further into that Love which passeth knowledge, till we are filled with all the fullness of God.

Chapter XII

THE WICKED HUSBANDMEN

Matthew xxi. 33-41; *Mark* xii. 1-9; *Luke* xx. 9-16.

THE immediate application of this parable requires a few remarks. Under the image of a vineyard is represented the kingdom of God, which had been committed pre-eminently, and in their own opinion exclusively, to the Hebrew people. This kingdom had not been entrusted to them rude and unorganized, but furnished with every appliance to maintain its healthy development and ensure its permanence. It was hedged round with regulations which were calculated to protect its subjects from contact with the idolatrous practices of other nations; and mountains, sea, and desert combined to defend the chosen people from invasion by the great kingdoms of the world. When, according to the tradition, the necessary truths and precepts had been thrown into a durable form, and deeply impressed upon the mind of the nation by a striking and solemn experience—the hazardous but successful flight from plague-stricken Egypt, the long wandering in the desert, where, amid its arid solitudes and the strange silence of its mountains, God seemed to speak face to face with their

leader, the rapid and brilliant conquest of the promised land—then the time of probation began. The awe of God's felt presence no longer enforced obedience, but, as though withdrawn into a far country, he left the people to prove whether they were worthy of their high calling and privileges.

The fruits of a pure monotheistic faith ought in due time to have become apparent in the high moral tone of the nation, in the boldness with which they bore witness to the truth, in deeds of justice and charity, and the strictness with which they avoided the defilements of the surrounding idolatry. God sent his servants, judges and prophets, to demand the fruits of righteousness; but their words, though they occasionally excited a passing repentance, generally either fell upon indifferent ears or provoked a violent hostility. Elijah fled for his life beyond the confines of the country, and, sick at heart for the sin of the people, prayed that he might die. The life of Elisha too was threatened; and, if tradition speaks truly, Isaiah was sawn asunder, and Jeremiah stoned. But the mercy of God was not yet weary. He sent them one more august than judge or prophet, not a servant but a son, not the bearer of any special message, whose partial vision caught only glimpses of the great purposes of God, but one in whom the Father's Spirit dwelt, who drank at the living fountains of his will, and whose heavenly goodness and sublime wisdom could not fail to excite the reverence of all who sincerely waited for righteousness.

But instead of being touched by this singular proof of the Divine patience and love they argued that now was the time to appropriate the kingdom for ever to themselves. The blameless son was

rejected and slain. The sequel, which he who could read the secrets of eternal justice saw in prophetic vision, we know from the pages of history. Those wicked husbandmen were miserably destroyed. Jerusalem was trodden down of the gentiles, and the kingdom of God delivered to the keeping of other nations. The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. The verdict of the world's highest faith has been declared emphatically in confirmation of the words of Christ; and to become a stone in that structure of which he occupies the chief corner, and to contribute in however lowly a manner to the strength and beauty of the entire edifice, has become the loftiest aspiration and the chief honour of the holy and the wise.[1]

We may now attempt to glean from the parable some instruction adapted to all times.

The first great principle which suggests itself is this, that all our religious blessings and privileges are from God. They are proofs, not of our merits, but of his love. It is he that has planted the heavenly vineyard, and hedged it round about, and provided it with all needful appliances. It is his providence that has gradually unfolded the religious thought of the race, and revealed more and more clearly to successive generations the deeper things of the Spirit. It was he that com-

[1] It is natural that Christians, in interpreting this parable, should regard the son as representing Jesus Christ. But if we interpret it solely in view of the circumstances of the time and the connexion in which it was spoken, we must suppose that Jesus referred to John the Baptist, for whom, though pursuing his own independent course, he had, as we know, a profound admiration. This was pointed out to me by an earnest and thoughtful student.

mitted to the Hebrews their monotheistic faith, and the law of righteousness in which they made their boast. It was he who gave to the world that mighty soul wherein dwelt his fullness, and who sent forth into the hearts of men the Spirit of his Son. It is he who has permitted us to breathe a Christian atmosphere, and to enjoy the accumulated wisdom of ages. From him all holy desires proceed; and if we ever lift our heads from the dust, and gaze with filial awe and worship into the infinite heavens, his is the glory. This may appear almost a truism, and we readily admit the abstract principle that all things except sin are ultimately from God.

Yet upon this subject we may distinguish two opposing currents of thought. There is the conviction that all that is great and holy originates with God, and is committed to man as a trust which he may humbly fulfil or faithlessly betray. To this conviction such words as inspiration and revelation are essential, and to translate them down into the philosophic terms, intuition and discovery, would be to invert the order of thought. These latter expressions belong more naturally to the other mode of conception, which delights in magnifying human power, and has a tendency to regard all advances in holiness and truth as originating with man. In this form of opinion all the wealth of devotional language which springs from the sense of unmerited love, and all the names and epithets which feebly express the clinging gratitude and meek dependence of the heart, are an absurdity and an offence. Now in practice I fear we are continually lapsing into this latter tendency. While we hurriedly admit that all our blessings are from

God, we forget to be thankful; and only a few rare souls carry with them this confession as a living and abiding faith. To Christ it was an ever present reality; and when he speaks of a certain householder planting a vineyard, and letting it out to husbandmen, he shadows forth a truth which pervaded his whole life.

If our religious privileges are the gift of God, and thus partake of the nature of a trust, it is clear that they involve corresponding responsibilities. They have not been committed to us as a special mark of favour to ourselves, but to be used in subordination to the Divine purpose. He whose providence has led us to a higher form of faith, or given us juster conceptions of spiritual freedom, or endowed us with more sensitive feelings of devotion, has a right to demand from us actions appropriate to these gifts. From the clearest conscience the holiest conduct ought to proceed, and from the highest thought of God the profoundest adoration. Those to whose guardianship the kingdom of heaven has been committed ought to be self-distrustful, almost fearful of their own weakness and unworthiness, and unceasing in their watchful activity. And in general we may say that every advancement in position brings with it duties nobler in quality and more extensive in range. Men readily assent to the reasonableness of this principle; but how prone we are to contradict it in practice, and, like the wicked husbandmen, to abuse the servants of God, who demand from us actions accordant with our privileges.

The foremost position, which ought to be adorned with the sublimest virtues, often serves only to exhibit selfishness on a grander scale. The

elevation and influence which ought to make us benefactors of the world we use for our own emolument. The endowments of genius, which ought to be consecrated as holy ministers of the Divine will, we degrade into flatterers to pamper our vanity. Our very religion, which, if nothing else, we ought to clasp with meek reverence as too great and wonderful for us, we attempt to pervert to our own exaltation, glorying in our election or in the breadth of our views, but bringing forth no fruit worthy either of a high spirituality or of a capacious intellect.

This disposition to regard our advantages as conferring exemptions rather than imposing responsibilities, when carried to its extreme point, ends in an attempt to appropriate these advantages to our exclusive use. The husbandmen, having got the heir into their power, thought that now was the opportunity to turn the vineyard from a trust into a possession, and escape once for all from these troublesome demands for fruit. So we may claim either inward endowments or outward privileges for our own, deny that they involve any degree of responsibility, and usurp a right to do with them as we will. The government of a country may fail to recognize the solemnity of its position, and, careless of the welfare of the people, exercise its high function with a sole view to its own grandeur and power. And in religion the self-worship and exclusiveness of sects are only too well known.

The bigots among the Jews attempted to appropriate the kingdom of God, and to them the idea was intolerable that anyone should enter that kingdom except through the gates of Judaism. Others in later times have too faithfully followed in their steps, and, scorning their rightful and honourable

rank as humble labourers, have attempted to exalt themselves into Lords over God's heritage. Men usurp the prerogative of God. Where you look for lowliness and candour and aspiration you find presumption, prejudice, and dogmatism; and where you expect the pleadings of love and the gentle counsels of wisdom you are met with the horror of ignorance and the bitterness of persecution. The Christian Church, like the Jewish, has killed its prophets and stoned those that have been sent to it. It has debased itself into a kingdom of this world, and, seeking its own light, has almost lost the light of God. Conscience no longer trembles under its rebuke. Faith no more leaps from its tomb at its reviving call. Its theology springs not with perennial freshness from the soul of inspiration, and its cross has dwindled into an unmeaning trinket. Able minds are retiring from it in disgust, and multitudes stand by, and mock at the babel of its sects. Oh! that it may repent before its house too is left unto it desolate, and the kingdom of God is taken from it, and given to more worthy hands.

Before we consider the final result of the tendency to appropriate the gifts of God let us glance at that love which the Father of all displays towards guilty man. His patience is not soon wearied. Warning after warning is sent. Opportunities are lavished for the wicked to return to their allegiance. When sin assumes a darker dye, grace yet more abounds; and not till every resource of love has been tried, not till the last most touching appeal, instead of subduing the self-will, has inflamed it into its most savage determination, is the long merited, long delayed, judgment inflicted.

But at last the judgment must come. Justice will not permit the progress of the world to be for ever obstructed by the misused privileges of a clique. By an inevitable law the kingdom of heaven ceases to be ours the moment self-will has gained the complete mastery; for the reign of self and the reign of God are incompatible. As soon as we honour and defend our religion because it is ours, and not because we feel in it a beauty and sacredness of which we are not worthy, we may retain indeed the empty form of truth, but we lose its essence and its power. Here, as in all things else, selfishness is a blind guide, and our narrow policy brings to pass the very events which we dread. Aspiring to be the sole dispensers of the world's redemption we see multitudes pressing past us into the kingdom of God, and ourselves thrust out. Only he who has sacrificed all becomes the heir of all things. Only he who has made himself of no reputation has been given a name which is above every name. Self-abnegation that God may be all in all is the condition on which his kingdom remains with us. Self-love and self-worship bring upon us a miserable destruction, the withdrawal of all that is most Divine in man, of all that would make us blessings to our race. We must, then, accept our privileges, not for our own glorification or aggrandizement, but that we may render fruit in due season, and cause him to be glorified who alone can illumine the soul, and reveal the mysteries of his will.

Chapter XIII

PARABLE OF THE MARRIAGE FEAST

Matthew xxii. 2-14; *Luke* xiv. 16-24.

IN the two previous parables Christ had held up to the chief priests and elders a picture of their own religious condition. In that of the two sons he showed them that, while they were very zealous in their professions, they were in heart more estranged from God than many who openly despised his laws. He then proceeded, in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, to sketch the course which as a nation they had always pursued towards the messengers of God, and gave no doubtful intimation of the crowning sin which would cause the kingdom of God to be taken from them, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. On this latter point he enlarges in the parable before us.

The kingdom of heaven is now presented under a more attractive aspect. In the preceding parables we have commandments given, and duties to be performed, and the kingdom of God is a vineyard, a place of toil, at a distance from its owner; but here it is a royal banquet, at which guests are graciously invited to attend, and to share in the

joy of the king's son. This difference corresponds to the distinction which St. Paul draws between the law and the gospel. Under a legal religion the idea of obedience preponderates over that of love. The commandment 'Go, work to-day in my vineyard,' might seem to contain its essence. In the law God spoke to men through the conscience, and revealed himself as the holy Ruler who had a right to their obedience. But in the new development of the kingdom of heaven man was to be admitted into higher privileges. He was to be no longer a servant, but a friend. He was to receive not only the demands of duty, but the invitations of love; and he was to work no more at a distance, having only the light of his written rules to guide him, but he was to enter into communion with God, and walk in the light of his Spirit. A spiritual feast was prepared for him, and he might pass through the veil into the holy of holies, and rejoice in the presence of the great King. Such is ever the burden of Christianity. Wherever its true voice is heard, there is not only warning for the negligent conscience, and command for the sluggish will, but entreaty for the waiting or the reluctant heart. It tells men of higher pursuits and purer enjoyments than form the staple of their lives, and in tones of love beseeches them to choose an eternal good. And those who reject its pleadings are not only resisting the demands of justice, but treating with contempt the solicitations of kindness and compassion.

Those, however, to whom the call first came were little grateful for the summons. Two degrees of enmity are marked in the parable. There were, first, those who were simply indifferent, and who

were far too deeply engrossed with the pursuits of agriculture and commerce to attend either to the warning voice of the Baptist crying in the wilderness, or to the gentler words of Christ spoken among the busy haunts of men. To them no active hostility is ascribed; they simply neglect the summons of the king's servants, as though it were no concern of theirs. This description corresponds with Christ's own experience.

It was not from the great business world that he met the bitter opposition which ended in his death. To the worldly man the fierce passions of false religion are generally as distasteful as the self-denying goodness of the true. His danger does not lie in this direction. His error is rather to be found in the feebleness of the spiritual nature. His inevitable devotion to material pursuits may gradually induce him to regard these as the sole realities, or at least as the nearest and most important interests, while spiritual things appear remote and shadowy. To those who were engaged in carrying on the world's traffic Christ probably seemed, not an object for bitter contempt and opposition, but an idle dreamer who for the sake of his own fancies was missing the substantial prizes which he might have won. He had foolishly chosen a very poorly remunerated work, when talents like his might have raised him to wealth and distinction.

But there were some who received the king's servants with insult, and even slew them. These men are not particularly characterized; they are simply mentioned as 'the rest.' But as this set of parables is directed against the chief priests and elders, we may suppose that they are alluded to under this term. It was from the professedly

religious that the most violent resistance came to the invitations of Divine love. Religious progress has always found in an official religious class its worst enemies. Those who ought to be always extending the kingdom of truth and love too often combine themselves in a phalanx to defeat the efforts of God's noblest servants. They are not only indifferent to the kingdom of heaven; they hate and persecute it, and endeavour to raise their own despotism on its ruins. It seems strange that the very power which was meant to subdue men into harmony and gentleness, may seize upon their worst passions, and exasperate them to a diabolical fury. But so it is. Religion may be perverted by men's wickedness, and compelled to add intensity to their sin. This expresses the peculiar danger of those who suppose that the interests of religion are in any special sense entrusted to them. They forget that such interests cannot be defended by earthly weapons, and that, if they ever allow the lower passions to mingle in their advocacy, they are not protecting, but insulting and slaying religion. True religion is that which imbues us with God's Spirit, and God's Spirit is Love. Only in proportion to our love are we really religious.

When hatred and bitterness and contempt come into our hearts, however loudly we may boast of our zeal, we are the enemies of God. How much bloodshed would the world have been spared, had this simple rule been remembered. Self-will has brought a blindness on men's souls; and the kingdom of God has received its grossest insults from its pretended champions. It was the professedly religious, men who believed that the future prosperity of truth and religion depended upon their

zeal, who stoned the prophets and crucified the Son of God. Does any man think himself religious? Here, then, lies his especial danger. Let him never forget that love alone is the spirit of light, and he that hateth his brother abides in darkness.

But the time of retribution was at hand. 'The king sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burnt up their city.' Sin inevitably brings down its penalty. Justice may long be silent, and by its forbearance seek to lead men to repentance; but it is not mocked. However little men may believe in it, it sits supreme upon the throne of the universe, and will one day make its voice heard. That Jerusalem which killed the prophets, and stoned those that were sent unto it, could not much longer remain the visible centre of God's kingdom upon earth. The day when it might lift the standard of righteousness to the Gentiles was fast passing away. The armies of the Gentiles would indeed soon flock to it, but not to worship in its temple, or do honour to its priesthood. Now that its cup of iniquity was full, its heaven should grow dark with the avenging clouds of justice, and its pride and bigotry be trodden under foot.

This downfall is but a signal exemplification of a great law. National prosperity rests fundamentally on national righteousness. As soon as a nation sets up material grandeur for its God, and prefers wealth and ease to the claims of justice and honour, the taint of rottenness is at its core. And if that nation's religion cease to be genuine devotion to God's will, and become a round of idle forms, supported with bitter zeal, and opposed as a barrier to

all free and earnest thought, then it has lost the only power that could yet save it, and surely, if slowly, its ruin must come. Individuals may sometimes prosper at the expense of righteousness; but not so nations. Their corruption eats away their strength; and great empires have successively fallen, not so much from the shock of adversaries who were the immediate occasion of their ruin, as from the subtle working of their own depravity, which perverted their policy and enfeebled their valour. When the great scroll of history is finally unfolded, it will be seen that sin has ever tended to bring about its own retribution, and that impartial justice, however it may have often seemed to sleep for a time, has ruled the destinies of nations.

When the king's invitation had been so insultingly rejected by those who were originally honoured with it, he sent out his servants into the highways to invite all that they should find; and the servants 'gathered together all, as many as they found, both bad and good.' Thus the kingdom of heaven was thrown freely open to all who would come. None might any longer regard it as an exclusive privilege. The knowledge of God was not to be confined to priests and pharisees; but the entreaties of a Father's love were to sound over all the world, and every soul that was hungering and thirsting for his righteousness might come and be filled. And so it actually proved. Christian teaching soon made its way into Gentile circles, and found there a ready acceptance which it never experienced among the Jews. But as the Church increased it was not possible that it should be kept pure from unworthy members. From the first many may have joined the little Christian com-

munities, which grew up in all the chief towns, from very mixed motives. The kingdom of heaven cannot be distinguished from the rest of the world by any unmistakable marks. The good and bad are inextricably blended together. Even the Apostles had their Judas amongst them. None but the king himself can adequately discriminate the true subjects of the kingdom from those who would enjoy its privileges, but shun its duties. The dream of a visible kingdom of God is only a dream. In this world at least it transcends all our artificial limitations. Everywhere the good and bad may be found side by side; and only the eye of him who sees the heart can make a true separation. To the most holy of feasts the hypocrite may creep in; and the traitor may receive a sop from the hand of the Son of God himself.

There is, however, one who cannot be deceived. 'When the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment.' The circumstance was evidently suspicious; but the man was not hastily condemned. An opportunity was given for explanation; but the man met the king's question with the silence of conscious guilt. Then the king ordered his servants to bind him hand and foot, and cast him into outer darkness. This circumstance has occasioned some difficulty. It seems rather harsh to invite a man unexpectedly out of the streets, and then punish him because he was not properly attired for the feast. Many have resorted for an explanation to a supposed eastern custom. It is said that the guests were provided with the necessary apparel by the kindness of their host, and that this man had shown his contemptuous indifference by refusing

the dress which was offered to him at his entrance. The wedding garment is then made to represent Christ's imputed righteousness, and the man's sin to consist in his satisfaction with his own righteousness, as though that were a sufficient preparation for heaven. This, though ingenious, is rather to add to a parable than to explain it. There is no sufficient evidence of the existence of the custom alluded to; and it is incredible that Christ should leave all this to be understood by his hearers. So important a point would be clearly brought out; and when the king addressed the man on the subject, he would have upbraided him with his supercilious folly in rejecting the garment so generously provided for him. To give point, moreover, to this interpretation the man ought to be represented not as having no wedding garment, but as having an inferior one of his own, which he chose to wear in preference to the rich dress presented by the bounty of the king.

It is more natural to assume that a sufficient time was given to the guests to go and attire themselves in a manner appropriate to the occasion, and that this man rudely entered the court without taking the trouble to prepare himself in a suitable manner. If this be the correct explanation, the moral lesson which it conveys is a simple one. It says nothing of the kind of preparation that is necessary, for that does not belong to the purpose of the parable; but it warns us that *some* preparation is necessary for those who would enter the kingdom of God, and that, if we thrust ourselves in without awe or reverence, we shall be cast out as unworthy. And does not this well describe the danger that arises when God's love is

first proclaimed in all its boundless comprehensiveness ? We may fail to have our hearts touched by that wonderful love, and use it only to cast off the dread and mystery of religion. We may abuse the kindness of our Father, and rush presumptuously into his presence, imagining that he exacts none but the lightest duties, and requires no consecration and surrender of self. It is sad indeed when the revelation of that Spirit which ought to make us most ardent in devotion and reverent in worship only increases our carelessness and flippancy, and we presume on the compassion that would bless us to assert our self-will with a ruder effrontery. But though God is Love, he has not ceased to be holy, or his eye to be terrible to the heart which scorns his presence. The soul which is not clad in that garment of faith and meek submission which God requires cannot taste of the spiritual banquet, but is shut out by its own perversity from communion with the king of righteousness.

'For many are called, but few are chosen.' The invitation is wide as the world. God's pleading love sounds in every heart. He would gather all to himself, and feed them on the bread of eternal life. But few are the chosen ones who surrender themselves to his will, the saints strong in righteousness and love, clothed in the rare graces of the Spirit, and seeking only to honour him from whom they consciously derive every blessing. We must not receive that call heedlessly or presumptuously, but with lowliness of heart seek for the robe of sonship, that when he shall come in to see the guests gathered from the world's highways, we may be among his chosen ones, and abide for ever in his presence.

Chapter XIV

THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

Matthew xx. 1-16.

THIS is confessedly one of the most difficult of the parables; for it is not at all obvious how it teaches the lesson which it is expressly intended to set forth—'Many shall be last that are first; and first that are last.' In the parable as it stands all the labourers are apparently placed on an equality, and it is necessary to seek for an implied truth which is not perceptible on the surface. We may perhaps obtain some light by considering the circumstances in which it was spoken.

A rich young man had come to ask Jesus what he should do to have eternal life. Jesus desired him to keep the commandments. The young man, who could honestly say that he had done so, still had a sense of want, an undefined longing for some higher and better life. Jesus then challenged him to give up the wealth in which his heart was entangled, and cast in his lot with the poor teacher of righteousness. The man went away sorrowful; for he could not make the great renunciation in obedience to his vision of a nobler fortune. Jesus embraced the opportunity to point out how difficult

it was for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God; difficult, because more than ordinary self-sacrifice is required; but not impossible, for with the help of God all things are possible, and a rich man may surrender himself to the call of God, and use his wealth for high and unselfish ends. The disciples, still lingering far below the thought of their teacher, were astonished; for was not the future kingdom to be the abode of ease and comfort, and if the rich, with all their advantages, could not enter it, who could? Peter, giving voice to the general feeling, exclaims that they have left all, and followed Jesus, and asks what then they should have. The question clearly implies that their action did not spring from pure love, but was at least mingled with expectations of future grandeur and triumph. The answer of Jesus seems to satisfy this expectation; but I think we may reasonably doubt whether it is to be understood literally.

The language of a prophet is often highly wrought and figurative, and yet bears some relation to the ideas of the time; and it is still an undecided question how far Jesus himself accepted these ideas in their literal sense. However this may be, for us the thrones and judgments must be spiritual. The answer says in effect, if you must have a reward for your renunciation of worldly things, that reward is the ascendancy of a lofty character, and the judgment which that character passes upon the righteousness of men. Jesus then proceeds to universalize his answer: *every one* who has made a renunciation, not for a reward, but 'for my name's sake,' out of pure and unselfish love, 'shall receive a hundredfold.' And this is

true; for the unselfish, not as a reward for their goodness, but by the simple fact of their self-surrender, have entered the kingdom of God's love, and, in the recognition of that love, become the true possessors of a hundred things which to the worldly and selfish are utterly unknown. And they 'shall inherit eternal life.' Thus the discourse returns to the thought with which the whole incident started. Eternal life is not an arbitrary reward for so much service rendered, but an inheritance bestowed by the good pleasure of him who gives it, and entered by simple surrender to the will of God, and to his holy Spirit of Love.

But now, having reached this high point in his discourse, Jesus subjoins a caution, 'But many shall be last that are first; and first that are last.' These words seem to be a warning to the Apostles not to presume upon their foremost position, and thus lower themselves in the scale of spiritual worth. The need for this warning was soon exemplified by the request that James and John should sit on his right hand and on his left in his kingdom. Doubtless they had understood his promise of the thrones literally, and now sought to secure for themselves the chief place among the Apostles. The remaining ten, moved by the same spirit of emulation, were indignant; and Jesus then pointed out in plain language the difference between worldly and spiritual estimates. Among the nations the great ones exercised lordship; but among his followers the great ones were those who, in self-forgetfulness, rendered the lowliest service to their brethren.

These circumstances reveal, I think, the purport of the parable. Men are called into the kingdom

of God at various times, some sooner, some later. Some have long and strenuous labour within the kingdom, others have labour that is shorter and less arduous. But they are all treated as equal. They are a brotherhood, a holy and royal priesthood; and the same gift of eternal life is, by the divine love, bestowed upon all alike. There are, no doubt, conditions, for a gift may be rejected; and it is clearly assumed in the parable that all the labourers did good and faithful work according to their opportunities. But the eternal life itself may be marred by some inward failure of the spirit. The desire to be recognized as first, to be elevated above one's brethren, to dwell upon one's own long and meritorious toil, really lowers us from the high place which we assume, and makes us last while we claim to be first. Those who are highest in the kingdom of heaven accept everything as a gift from the fullness of God's unmerited love, and in the simplicity of their own love offer the required service, seeking nothing for themselves, and cherishing no jealousy towards their brethren; even 'as the Son of Man came, not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

Chapter XV

THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT AND THE TWO DEBTORS

Matthew xviii. 23-34; *Luke* vii. 41, 42.

THESE two parables treat of the nature and effects of Divine and human forgiveness. Christ's teaching upon this subject will be explained in connexion with the Lord's Prayer; and it will be sufficient here to make a very few remarks. The circumstances in the Parable of the unforgiving Servant are drawn from well-known usages of the time, and reference to them as illustrations of spiritual truth does not imply any approval of imprisonment and torture for debt. The object of the parable is simply to enforce the lesson that men who so deeply need forgiveness, and have experienced the Divine patience and compassion, ought to be very lenient towards those who have offended themselves; and it clearly implies that many men who have grievously offended, and can have no hope but in the clemency of God, are harsh and cruel towards the petty faults of others. The story of the unforgiving servant shows that the parable of the two debtors does not

furnish an invariable rule; for the servant who was forgiven an enormous debt was not moved thereby to gratitude or love. A difficulty has been felt in the revoking of the pardon which had been granted. But in spiritual things this is inevitable. The man who acts against the Spirit of God, by refusing to show to his fellow man the mercy which has been lavished on himself, is by that very fact excluded from the communion which is the deepest thing in the experience of forgiveness.

The parable of the two debtors teaches, by implication, that God forgives men out of pure grace. There is, of course, nothing that we can give to the infinite Creator; but a broken and a contrite heart he will not despise, and, when we turn to him in our weakness and sorrow, his mercy is always ready to receive us. But the immediate object of the parable is to show that one who has greatly sinned may have a deeper sense of the Divine love than one whose outward respectability has made him confident of his own righteousness and callous to spiritual appeal. Towards the end of the narrative there is an apparent contradiction. In the parable the love is excited by the sense of forgiveness; but afterwards the woman is said to be forgiven because she loved. But the contradiction is more in the words than in the facts. The woman's love had clearly been aroused by her listening to Christ's teaching. She had heard of God's love, and his willingness to pardon even such sinners as herself; and it was her belief in this love that brought her with tears to seek an assurance of forgiveness from that wonderful teacher who had kindled such a light of hope amid her darkness and despair. It is only when love is reciprocated

that pardon is completed. We have seen in the other parable that forgiveness disappeared when it failed to evoke any love. Thus it is true that we love much because we have been much forgiven, and that the forgiveness is assured because we love much, and are thereby drawn into communion with the Spirit of God.

Chapter XVI

THE PRODIGAL SON, THE LOST SHEEP, AND THE LOST PIECE OF MONEY

Luke xv.

THESE three parables form a group, called forth by the same occasion, and teaching fundamentally the same lesson. The statement by which they are introduced does not necessarily imply that they were spoken at one time, or in connexion with a single incident. Indeed the Greek rather suggests that they are specimens of the kind of answer which Jesus was in the habit of giving to an unworthy reproach. The publicans and sinners made a practice of coming to hear him, and the Pharisees and scribes kept murmuring, saying that 'this man receives sinners, and eats with them.' This being so, the differences in the treatment of the subject may not have been so clearly designed as some interpreters suppose; and it may be sufficient to point out that in the parables of the stray sheep and the lost piece of money the seeking for that which had disappeared is emphasized, while this feature is absent from that of the prodigal son. Various other subtle differences, based on theological conceptions, are pointed out;

but there is nothing in these simple utterances to suggest the ecclesiastical notions of a later time, and it is difficult to suppose that Jesus had them in his mind, and quite impossible to think that they could have occurred to the listeners. It is better to leave them in their original beauty, and allow them to make their own natural impression on our hearts. In unfolding the spiritual truth which underlies them all we may confine our attention to its rich development in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

This parable is one of the most interesting and complete of all the parables of Christ. It is so full of nature, and so simply told, that we are not at first aware how profound is its meaning. Yet precisely because it is so natural, it is replete with the purest and most affecting truths. By pausing on its various parts we may detect many a latent beauty, and be more impressed by its wonderful picture of our spiritual relations.

Its principal aim appears to be to illustrate the paternal love of God in receiving the repentant and returning sinner. But this portion is introduced by a description of the gradual growth of sin, and its accompanying misery; and the father's love is subsequently contrasted with the coldness and envy of a brother. The parable thus divides itself into three parts: first, the downward course of the prodigal, ending in wretchedness; secondly, his penitence, and restoration to his father's home; and lastly, the conduct of the elder brother.

It is hardly necessary to state that the father represents the God and Father of all mankind. But there has been some difference of opinion about the sons. According to one interpretation,

the Jews and Gentiles are referred to. The Gentiles had wandered far away from their spiritual home, but, filled with repentance, were turning again to God, and being admitted to his favour. The Jews, on the other hand, had remained at home in the observance of God's commandments, and were angry that the Gentiles were received with such joy. The parable is no doubt susceptible of such an interpretation. But we are not required thus to narrow its scope, and relegate it to the time of the Pauline controversy. Its truth is of universal application; and the occasion on which it is introduced leaves us no reasonable doubt as to its immediate reference. We are told that the publicans and sinners drew near to listen to the teaching of Christ, and the Pharisees and scribes murmured because he received and even eat with such persons.

The parable being spoken in justification of his conduct, it is most natural to suppose that the two sons represent the two classes of people whom Jesus was addressing. There is no ground for assuming that the publicans and sinners represent Gentiles; for the publicans, or tax-gatherers, were for the most part, like Zacchæus, 'sons of Abraham'[1]; and the vague term 'sinners' can determine nothing about lineage, but probably refers simply to the various indifferent characters which then, as now, were to be found everywhere. We have therefore to reflect, not on an extinct controversy, but on two kinds of character, which exist in all ages. The pharisaic temper still

[1] For this reason they were specially disliked by the Jews; but classical writers also speak of the publicans with contempt.

flourishes, confident of its own righteousness, despising others, and submissive to all needful forms and creeds. And we may still find many who are conscious of grievous faults, and wholly out of sympathy with the religious authorities, and yet are thirsting for something better than pharisaism, and would listen gladly to one who would speak to them from the fullness of his heart, and tell them of a spirit freer, more quickening, more loving than that of a self-constituted orthodoxy. And so long as there is in man a feeling of emptiness and want, a sighing for a spiritual home where there is fullness of joy and peace, the parable of the prodigal son will be read with eager interest as the utterance of the master-spirit of the world.

The parable proceeds, 'A certain man had two sons; and the younger said to his father, "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me"; and he divided unto them his living.' It does not appear that, according to Jewish usage, the son had a right to make such a demand; and we may presume that he solicited his portion of the property as a favour to be granted at once, instead of waiting till it came to him by the slower process of inheritance. This request admits us into the young man's heart, and shows us the root from which all the subsequent evil sprang. His home affections were not strong. He had never felt the real nature of his filial relationship, and instead of looking up to his father as his best and truest friend, he regarded his tender care and advice as a troublesome interference. This want of affection and reverence correctly symbolizes the first approaches of sin. As Christ elsewhere says, out of the *heart* proceed evil thoughts and then evil

deeds. There is a straying away of the soul from God before the commandment is transgressed. We become weary of our dependence, and would be lords in the creation, not doing the will of another, or holding whatever we possess in trust from another, but having our own property to use as we please. Instead of loving and worshipping God, we desire to be separated from him, and to live by our own counsels and our own strength. This is the deepest root of sin. As the perfect dedication of ourselves to God is the ideal of Christian perfection, so the living for self instead of God is the one great sin in which all others are comprised. From this inward betrayal we must guard our hearts, that they may be temples of reverence, truth, and faithfulness, and never become the corrupt centres of unholy lives. For it has pleased God to grant men their request, and to divide to every one his portion; and we may either offer to God the free service of our love, and draw the streams of our life from the fountain of his mercy, or wander away till we learn in bitterness and tears how blessed it would be to feel once more our Father's watchful care.

'And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country.' The estranged heart did not lead immediately to any apparent change in the mode of life. For some, though not many, days the prodigal remained at home. The complete transference of the affections from higher to lower objects requires time. At first indeed it is painful to feel that any pure devotion is growing weaker, and that the aspirations which have engrossed our minds in our best moments are making way for

inferior desires. And even after the fatal chill has passed over the soul, and the name of God is no longer precious, the force of habit preserves for a time the semblance of piety. When two hearts which have been one diverge gradually till the cord of love is broken, the same offices of kindness may be still performed, because it is terrible to recognize openly the fact that friendship is really gone. To the onlooker no difference may be evident; but who does not know the coldness of this dead body of kindness? Who would not prefer to ten thousand deeds of such service one look of tenderness, one tone of genuine affection? And if we, self-interested as we are, can never accept a loveless benefit as a substitute for the heart's attachment, how is it when we offer to the supreme friend a few cold words, or a few works of seeming goodness, instead of our love? The father in the parable must have felt during those few days of apparent duty that his son's heart was gone, and all that is most precious in son or friend was already lost.

And when our deepest devotion rests no longer on the eternal Father, but has fallen on the things of earth and time, it is perhaps better that we should gather all together, and take our journey into a far country, to try the experiment of living without God, or rather living without the knowledge and love of him, for without him none can live. Doubtless it is for our good that he permits us thus to visit a region so far from our real home, and allows the outward and visible sin to follow the sin of the soul. Many would be content with a godless life, unless some sin which can be named and described, and of which the guilt can rudely strike the conscience, came to warn them of their

alienation of soul, and tell them that the true end of their being is to live in communion with God. The deed that brings with it shame and misery may be the finger-post which shows us whither we are travelling. It was for his own final good that the prodigal was allowed to depart from his home, and journey into that far country.

When he had thus completely broken his old associations, he abandoned himself without restraint to the pursuit of pleasure. 'He wasted,' or, more correctly, 'scattered his substance in riotous living.' The word 'riotous' does not necessarily denote any special kind of vice, but implies, generally, a reckless way of living. It is the word from which the name of the parable is derived. He scattered his money in a manner ruinous alike to his property and to himself. Pleasure was sweet, and he thought it could be enjoyed without end. But at last he had spent all, and found himself deprived of the means of gratification. This is a true description of the disappointment attendant on the pursuit of pleasure. Here we use the word pleasure in its widest sense, to indicate the gratification of ourselves in any way whatsoever. Much toil and even self-sacrifice, may coexist with a selfish devotion to our own ends. The ambitious man, in order to place himself on a lonely eminence above his fellows, will expose himself upon the field of battle, and become inured to hardship and self-restraint. The man who is determined to be wealthy, and supposes that in pomp and splendour he can quench the thirst of his nature, will labour with indefatigable industry and curb every wasteful habit which could impede the execution of his

purpose. Though a self-seeking life of this kind is far better than a reckless abandonment of oneself to the instincts of the moment, yet the difference is more intellectual than moral. The mind was originally constructed on a grander scale, and its vices exhibit greater strength and a more persistent aim.

But the life, no less than that of the mere profligate, is in a region far from God; and the satisfaction desired must at last be exhausted. It is curious to think of a great conqueror in his shroud, of the glory and the pomp and the dreaded name sinking down into the silent grave. But without thinking of that final separation from all perishable things, do not many find, while yet they breathe, that the power of self-gratification is all spent, and they have no durable wealth of soul to be their support in unforeseen emergencies? Does not Bonaparte, pacing drearily the shores of St. Helena, symbolize the emptiness of heart of many a one in high station whose power of enjoyment is gone, and who feels no genuine love breathed upon him from God or man? A child in its innocent play is happier than he; for the joy of nature sparkles in the eye, and unpretended mirth dances on the lips. But he who has departed from God has no healthy joy, but only a feverish excitement as its sickly substitute. Passion of whatever kind grows in power by gratification; but the pleasure which it yields dwindles away. We seek some object with burning desire for days and months; and when we grasp it, its fruition dies in an hour. God alone can satisfy the infinite desire of the soul. With him is the only wealth which can be never spent, the immortal heritage, undefiled and in-

corruptible. The cross alone can raise us to the right hand of the throne of glory; but the life of self sinks us into a region of woe, where desire still rages, but our means of satiating it are all spent.

'And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want.' So, in the spiritual world, when the dream of happiness has fled from the self-seeking man, owing either to the failure of outward resources, or to the exhaustion of his capacity of enjoyment, he discovers that the region which seemed so fair and bright is a land of famine. The true food of the soul is not there. The hearts with which he sought fellowship, he sees, are gnawed with hunger. Before he feels the pang of want himself, he becomes aware that others are starving, that their souls are lean and stunted, hungering in vain for some new emotion, some pleasure which is not yet insipid. How true was this at the time when the parable was uttered. The great empire which constituted the civilized world was a prey to spiritual famine. Everywhere men were craving satisfaction for their nature; and now with superstition, now with philosophy, now with voluptuousness, they strove in vain to stop the mouth of desire. In the madness of this mental starvation they revelled in sins at which nature shudders; but there was no satisfaction; all was bitterness, and weariness, and disappointment. 'Blessed,' indeed, 'are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled.' But that lower hunger for our own gratification refuses to be filled. It is an insatiable evil; and feeding only increases the fury of the appetite.

When at last the famine reached the prodigal,

and he began himself to be in want, two lines of conduct lay open to him. He might at once have acknowledged his error, and returned home. But pride suggested a different course, and he went and joined himself to a citizen of the country. The word citizen implies a contrast with the condition of the prodigal, who still felt himself a stranger. He had not become entirely habituated to the ways of sin, and could not yet feel as if the famine-stricken country were his native land. He hoped, no doubt, by gluing himself, as the word literally means, to a native of the country to ingratiate himself into his favour, and, through his assistance to obtain further means of enjoyment, or at least keep hunger at a distance. By taking this step he already abandoned the independence for which he had sacrificed so much, and bound himself more completely to the country which he had chosen. Thus, when men pursue a wrong aim in life, they do not confess their mistake and retrace their steps as soon as they become conscious of an inner want which their mode of life does not satisfy. On the contrary, they are apt to confirm themselves in their previous course, and become the servants of those who, they hope, will help them forward. Servants they may not be in outward appearance; but when, in order to advance our interest or pleasure, we make ourselves dependent on the favour or caprice of another, we become servants in the only degrading sense of that word.

The man who accumulates wealth by unrighteous means is the servant of those who are necessary to the success of his plans. The voluptuary is the servant of those who minister to his pleasures. Some of the emperors of proud Rome were the

servants of their cooks. And, in general, every one who hopes to secure his own sinful gratification through the instrumentality of mean men, citizens in the land of wickedness, is the servant of the very men whom he considers his tools. Even in this outward sense the parable is a true representation of human life. But there may also be a reference to the deeper truth that 'whosoever sinneth is the slave of sin.' The life of mere self-will ends in the most bitter bondage. The desires which we expected to use as the mere ministers of our pleasure, become the tyrants; and our wills, which could not bend to a higher law, the slaves. These passions and impulses, we feel, are not the true inward self. Perverted from their righteous ends, they become, as it were, citizens of a region far from God; and we vainly hope, by joining ourselves to them and giving them full lordship over us, to satiate our gnawing hunger. Other than Christian writers have seen that in this way no liberty is to be found, but the sinful indulgence of passion crushes the power of the will, and leaves the man at last an abject slave.

But there is a lower deep. The prodigal was sent into the fields to feed swine, and 'he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him.' To feed swine is low enough an occupation in our eyes; but to a Jew it was the last depth of degradation. There is an unutterable pathos in this brief description. The lonely profligate, utterly uncared for by that world for which he lived, striving, not to nourish, but only to fill himself, to take away that dreadful sense of emptiness, by eating the food of loathsome beasts.

Before leaving this portion of the parable we may cast a glance across the chasm which divides the present from the future world. We see in this lonely, empty heart the true punishment of the guilty. Is not this hunger, for ever desiring to be filled, what is elsewhere called the 'worm that dieth not'? Is not this hot craving the destroying flame which the stream of low pleasures can never quench? Passion's fruitless yearning, appetite with nothing to appease it, a soul neither loved nor loving, fit only for a swinish company, where there is no fellowship or sympathy—such is the end of sin, a living death, a conscious burial. It is not a punishment arbitrarily inflicted, but the natural and inevitable result of the soul's disloyalty. Many may sin, and not sink so low as this. But the seed of all our woe is planted when we fix our affections, not on things above, but on things beneath; when we are guided by regard to our own interest, and not by the law of duty; when, in a word, we prefer self to God.

We have now to trace the course of the prodigal's repentance, and see him restored to his former privileges.

The wretchedness to which he was reduced was calculated to awaken serious thought. It was not only the award of justice, which renders to every man according to his works. It was also the pleading of mercy, seeking to subdue the proud heart, and lead it back to its true blessedness. We may imagine him sitting lonely and famished in the fields. The novelty and excitement of his life were past, and he was conscious only of being miserable. What was he to do? Was he to sit there and perish? Was he to go and join himself

to some other citizen who might have pity on his hunger? Or was he to return to that father whose care he had despised? The voice whose counsels he had so long obeyed would advise him to seek some new employment in the service of sin. How mortifying to acknowledge himself mistaken and wicked! How hard to meet the contempt of his elder brother! And might not even his father receive him sternly and coldly? Was not tending swine better than returning to a home where he could never be happy again? But another voice warned him that 'the wages of sin is death,' and a return to his father's house was his only safe and dutiful course. The vision of his ancient home rose before him, with its pure affections and innocent delights. The Spirit of God was speaking to him through his misery. The parable does not, indeed, describe the inward struggle; but we may suppose that through some such process it was that 'he came to himself.' One thought of comfort, however, is undoubtedly implied: that all the misery of wrongdoing has a high and holy purpose, and is not the demon of vengeance, but the angel of mercy, sent to reclaim our wandering souls. Thus we may accept our shame and remorse meekly and gladly as sent from him who loves us, to strengthen us in what is good and bring us to ourselves and to him.

There is deep meaning in the words 'he came to himself.' Sin is akin to insanity, inasmuch as it involves a false discernment of the nature of things. There is a moral condition in which a man sees nothing truly. He miscalculates his own importance, and consequently misinterprets the relations existing between himself and everything

around him. With such a faulty conception, the prodigal had prided himself on his daring and independence. He thought himself a king in the domain of understanding, and deemed his father's advice contemptible. And he scorned the simplicity of his home as colourless and insipid in comparison with the great pleasure-seeking world outside. All this was false, as much opposed to reality as the dreams of a maniac. The first step towards his recovery was to come to himself, to see things as they really were, and become conscious that all the folly and perversity were on his own side.

This expression also indicates that sin is a departure from the true inward self, the immortal spirit at the centre of our being, which tells us of truth and goodness. Those lower tendencies which beguile us into sin are not parts of the higher self, but forces which we ought to curb and direct. When we yield unlawfully to our baser desires, it is then, according to Christ's teaching, that we abnegate self and dethrone our wills. And, on the other hand, when we surrender our wills to God, and bow down our whole nature in subjection to his holiness, it is then that the will exerts its most lordly power, and the real self, the true Man within us, assumes the rule, and proves a right to govern. Thus what we style self-will is really treason against the authority of the will, and a subjection to things beneath it; while, on the contrary, the very height and majesty of moral power, which is essentially an exercise of the will, blend into one with religious devoutness and humility, and the truest hero becomes the truest saint.

When the prodigal came to himself, he began to

see things truly :—'How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger.' The course which he had pursued was not, after all, the most pleasurable. He would have been far happier had he remained at home ; for even his father's servants were better off than he. They had at least abundance to satisfy their wants, and were not tormented with his insatiable cravings. Thus, there are many persons not very highly gifted, with no profound religious emotions, and touched by no thought of their sonship, who yet find in the steady performance of their duties, in quiet and faithful service, a peace and happiness of mind which is foreign to those who would make the substance of their life consist in violent emotions or the satisfaction of inordinate desires. Commonplace as they are considered, they yet have bread enough and to spare, and are not consumed by that mental hunger which besets men who are capable of greater things, but have devoted their lives to a wrong pursuit.

As soon as this truth rose distinctly before the wanderer's mind, he resolved to alter his course :—'I will arise and go to my father.' We may suppose that he had been sitting in abject despair upon the ground. Gradually the whole truth broke upon him. He was reaping the fruit of his own sin. But why remain there any longer ? He would rise from the attitude in which weakness and indecision had placed him, and, seeking his father's house once more, would say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son ; make me as one of thy hired servants.' Here let us observe

his deep sense of having sinned. Sorrow, shame, and mortification were not enough. These we feel when we have lapsed into imprudence or folly. To sin is indeed imprudent and foolish; but it is also something far worse. And the regret or mortification which follows foolish deeds differs widely from the sorrow which a man feels when he confesses to himself and to God, 'I have sinned; for I have slighted some holy affection, I have selfishly brought suffering upon others.'

So long as we regret merely the imprudence or the folly of our conduct, there is no real repentance, no heartfelt sorrow before God, impelling us to return and confess ourselves unworthy. Indeed the mere sense of wounded pride would rather induce us to persevere, and close our eyes against the simple facts. He who has done foolishly regrets the personal loss, the lowering of the estimation in which he is held by himself and others; and his principal anxiety is to vindicate the soundness of his judgment. But the sorrow of repentance is not a sorrow for ourselves. It is a sorrow for having grieved the Holy Spirit, for having filled unworthily the station where God has placed us, and neglected the duties which he appointed; and such sorrow is intolerable without confession. We must say to our Father that we have sinned. In the truest repentance there is no sense of mortification; for that implies a selfish reference to the higher position which we have lost. It is not the imprudence, but the sinfulness, of wrongdoing that is present to the mind; and therefore the feeling is a holy and unselfish grief. To lose ourselves before God, to mourn, not because we have debased ourselves, and are unable to lift our heads

as proudly as once we did, but because we have violated the law of God—this is the attendant feeling of repentance. With such a feeling is necessarily blended a strong desire to be more faithful; and there is no wish to escape the penalty, the grief and pain, but everything is welcomed which can give permanence to our new obedience, and increase our fidelity to God.

There is a beautiful touch of nature in the request, 'make me as one of thy hired servants.' Intimately connected with our sense of having sinned is a feeling of self-distrust, a fear that our sorrow may be fruitless, and we may again prove unequal to our duties. We desire some outward support, which may help to ensure our steadiness. Having found ourselves unworthy to be called sons, and that perfect freedom is a gift which we are almost certain to abuse, we would have our liberty curtailed, and be placed in the position of a servant rather than a son, a position where obedience would be less difficult, and which we might hope to occupy more worthily. In our human relations, he who has to perform the same definite routine of work day after day under the direct supervision of another, has the easiest kind of duty. His conscience has the least possible strain, and no delicate moral judgment is required. But in proportion as a man is withdrawn more and more from the superintendence of others, as more is entrusted to him, and his work becomes more various and complicated, his character must be of a higher grade, his sense of duty stronger, and his moral perceptions clearer. And nowhere is a man's rectitude so severely tested, and the strain upon his conscience so great, as where he has to

determine for himself both the nature and the amount of his duties. So, in our relations to God it is easier to live as servants, performing a fixed round of duties appointed for us than to act as sons, shaping our lives in the exercise of freedom, under the guidance, not of the law, but of the Spirit.

He who, shackled by no outward authority, yet through the force of reverence and love within him lives nobly and faithfully, stands far above him who, under the control of that which is outside himself, simply keeps the commandments. The one is a son, the other a hired servant, of God. But when the soul is filled with remorse and grief, and we feel that, though we are sons, we are not worthy to be called such, we would fain be made as hired servants, have our plain course of duty appointed for us, and be kept to it by the constraint of authority. It is a difficult as well as a glorious thing to stand on the height of our sonship, to keep so near the throne of God, to hold communion with him and live in his Spirit; and how often do we fall from our holy privilege, and dishonour our freedom. Our hearts cry for help, and when we are truly humble and self-distrustful; when the prayer is wrung from our inmost soul, 'make us as thy hired servants, as faithful, as useful,' our Father's help will come, tender, strengthening, and consoling; not indeed to make us servants, but to enable us to be sons, and to keep us near himself. Through pride we stray. In humility and dependence we return, that we may live in him and by him, shielded, not by the sternness of his authority, but by the gentleness of his love. And thus that cry for help from a soul that feels its need is answered, like all true prayers, not in the

form in which it is offered, but in a way far more glorious, from the unsearchable depths of our Father's mercy.

But this is anticipating. As soon as the prodigal had formed his resolution he acted upon it. 'He arose and came to his father. And when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.' This prompt and earnest affection, so unreproachful in its kindness, must have completed and sealed his penitence. Nothing so subdues the heart, and provokes to tears, as an unmerited tenderness. Hard faces, which pain or denunciation could never move will melt in presence of such unexpected and forgiving love. Imagine how different the result might have been, if the father had deemed it necessary to repress his natural affection, if he had thought that justice required him to stand aloof till he was sure that the penalty was fully paid, if he had supposed it criminal to care for his son's hollow cheeks and the drooping lids which hid his shame-stricken eyes. Had he been a stern moralist, filled with righteous indignation, and giving heed, not to the warm and sacred impulses of his heart, but to cold theories about the need of satisfaction for every offence, his son's resolution might have failed, and he might have turned back in bitterness, and been lost for ever; or he might have crept timidly up to his old home, when the gathering darkness would conceal him, have looked wistfully at the cheerful light within, and have heard the merry voices, the familiar tones of long ago, while the hard door was closed against him; and learning from the servants that his father would not be appeased, he might have lain down on the cold ground to die of

starvation beside his father's gate. And then misnamed justice might smile scornfully over the poor worn body; but the angel of mercy would bend over it and weep.

Ah! it is not a severe exacting justice that relieves our sin-burdened hearts. No, it is a love which runs to meet us, a tenderness which enfolds us, all unworthy as we are, a mercy free, unmerited, unpurchased. Had this parable alone of all the teachings of Christ come down to us, it would entitle him to our deepest veneration; it is so unlike the teaching of scribes and Pharisees in all ages, it speaks with such a melting appeal to the human heart, and is full of such blessed comfort. God is not like man; he does not screen an unforgiving temper behind the outraged name of justice. His name is love. He desires not sacrifice; a broken and a contrite heart he will not despise. Thus we are saved by grace; for 'He hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities; for as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.'

I have said that the tenderness of the father would complete the repentance of the son. Accordingly the prodigal makes the confession he had resolved upon, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.' His unworthiness he would lament all the more keenly when he felt his father's kiss of welcome. But he does not pray now to be made as one of the hired servants. Not that his presumption is returning; but that running to meet him, that warm embrace, tell him that such is not his father's purpose; and he is too sub-

missive and trustful to question the wisdom of that purpose. It was fear of his own weakness that induced his humble wish. But now he is safe in his father's arms, and humility and filial reverence require him to accept the name and honour of a son. True humility bows to the command of God, and moves with equal readiness whether he desires us to give place to a more honourable or invites us to go up higher. Where he sees fit to place us, he can give us strength to stand.

The remainder of this portion of the parable requires few remarks. The best robe, the ring, which then as now was often a seal, the shoes, may indicate simply the restoration of the son to all his former privileges; or they may further symbolize the robe of sanctity, the sealing with the Holy Spirit, the feet 'shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.' The symbolical interpretation seems to me a theological refinement not contained in the intention of the speaker. But the slaying of the fatted calf and the festal mirth signify no doubt the 'joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth,' as that has been expressly referred to. Such is the unselfish gladness that rings through the courts of God. May we all, laying aside our blind scorn, unite in that sacred joy, and feel a thrill of pleasure whenever any soul draws nearer to God, and any child of his who was dead is alive again, and having been lost is found.

The parable might naturally have closed with the reception of the penitent son. But the benignity of the father is presented with more striking effect by contrasting it with the loveless character of the elder brother.

'His elder son was in the field.' This circum-

stance may be mentioned simply because it was necessary to the plan of the story that he should be away from home when his brother arrived; or it may be intended to imply that he was usefully engaged in the labours of husbandry, and, instead of wasting his father's substance with riotous living, was diligently adding to his store. 'As he came and drew nigh to the house' he heard unusual sounds of rejoicing, the 'music and dancing' which in oriental festivals were performed for the entertainment of guests by persons hired for the purpose. Already the less amiable side of his character begins to display itself. He becomes suspicious, and calls one of the servants to ask 'what these things meant,' a form of interrogation which implies no genial mood. He thought it strange, no doubt, that he had not been informed of the approaching festival. His father could not care for him, or he would have shown him more consideration. He became annoyed and irritable. But when he heard that the feast was given in honour of his younger brother, 'he was angry, and would not go in. Therefore came his father out, and intreated him.' This is an exquisite description, and reveals to us more clearly the father's heart. We now see that his affection for his younger son is not the result of mere natural impulse. It is not only the pity which is easily moved at the sight of distress, but is founded on principle, and is a wise and impartial love. He does not upbraid his elder son with the slight put upon himself, or with his unreasonable anger. He shows to him the same tenderness as to his brother, and 'intreats him.' There seems to be in some persons a tendency to treat the prodigal in a family

with undue partiality, and forget to show an equal kindness to the more dutiful. But the father in the parable shows the same considerate love to both his sons. And having received with gladness the younger, whose deplorable condition and repentant tears appealed to his pity and generosity, he then goes out with the same gentleness to intreat the elder, whose conduct might naturally excite his indignation.

The reply of the son to his father's intreaties requires some consideration. It helps to remove a difficulty which has been often felt. How comes it that one who had remained at home diligently performing his duties, one designed to represent a righteous man, could regard with such jealousy the welcome given to his brother? In considering this difficulty we must be careful, in the first place, not to exaggerate the fault committed. We have no unexpected crime to account for. No commandment was violated, the feeling described is eminently natural, if not to all, at least to many excellent persons. From his own point of view the son had been treated slightingly. Though more deserving than his brother, he had never received so high an honour. It was, I repeat, natural that he should be somewhat hurt that the fatted calf and the festal gladness were reserved for one who had done nothing but prove himself unworthy of them. It was exactly what many a conscientious man would feel in the same circumstances. And yet we must admit that his conduct is not attractive, but is deficient in beauty and graciousness.

What is the cause of this? The answer will appear in his own words :—'Lo! these many years do I serve thee,' or, more strictly, 'slave for thee.'

Is there not a want of affection in these words? They are not spoken in the spirit in which Paul calls himself 'a slave of Jesus Christ,' as if that alone were a sufficient honour. Paul uses the word, not as one who felt himself in bondage, from which it would be pleasant to have a moment's relaxation, but as one who had found the freedom of a true son, who never can labour enough to prove his gratitude and affection. But the son in the parable evidently feels the hardship of his service, and thinks himself meritorious in rendering it. It is not the free tribute of his filial love, the poor return for his father's kindness, but severe work faithfully done, and deserving a reward. His answer expresses a sentiment the opposite of that conveyed in Christ's words, 'I call you not servants, but friends'; and in Paul's 'Thou art no more a servant, but a son.' Not that the duties of friendship are less, but that their servitude is not felt. The offerings of friendship are spontaneous, looking for no reward, but gushing forth as the irrepressible manifestation of love. One who thinks he is slaving for his friend does not love his friend; and when a man casts in your teeth a kindness he has rendered, you feel that there was no real kindness, but only a service performed in the spirit of a hireling, such a service as no independent mind would willingly accept. Now this is exactly the sort of service rendered by the elder son:—'For years I have been slaving for thee; yet thou never gavest me so much as a kid, that I might make merry.'

Such may be the language of the man of duty, but never of the man of love. This view is corroborated by the further words, 'neither transgressed

I at any time thy commandment.' A strict fulfilment of the commandments constitutes his notion of filial duty. The overflowing affection, the profound reverence, due to such a father never occur to him. Possible faults of temper, a secret selfishness of heart within himself, he never suspects. Having done all that he was ordered to do, he deems himself perfect and irreproachable. In conformity with this view he looks for an external reward. He dreams not of any recompense deeper than an outward joy. His soul, which had no real love, knew not that to lay a daily gift upon the altar of its purest affections was in itself the truest bliss. He had slaved for his father, and would fain receive a slave's reward.

Now let us apply this to our own spiritual condition. Surely we are here plainly taught, what perhaps we learn with greater distinctness from Paul, that the law of duty, though in itself 'holy and just and good,' is not the highest law, and cannot raise men to the purest goodness. The man who confines his attention to the moral law, and aims only at the fulfilment of its commandments, is apt to feel too exclusively the sense of obligation, which is closely akin to that of servitude, and looks for some reward for the sake of which he is to practise the virtues. And he is liable to fall into precisely such faults as that represented in the parable. For the mere sense of duty does not enable us to read another's heart; and through a want of sympathy, and the delicate tact of love, we may continually rasp against fine feelings, of the existence of which we are not aware. The sense of duty, too, wages but a feeble war against those inner tendencies to evil which may be easily con-

strued into virtue. It may protest with little energy against a lurking jealousy, a secret reference to self, which can readily assume the name of righteous indignation. And, again, though it may tell us that it is wrong to give way to anger, it is powerless to check its rushing torrent, and it crashes down before that and every vehement passion. This is not theorizing, but is a fact familiar to every passionate nature where the sense of duty is high. Times without number persons with such a temperament approve and disobey the law of conscience, though they despise themselves in the very act. And how often do we see conscientious men grievously mistaken in their course of conduct, thinking that they are doing God service, while they are acting in direct opposition to his Spirit. Martyrs have been murdered at the command of conscience. Many of the worst evils of the present day are, I doubt not, for the sake of conscience. And many a deed of dark selfishness is performed by men who would not wilfully violate the least of the commandments. We need a more inward and penetrating power to subdue the evil within us. While we look upon life as a mere service, we are still low down beneath the Christian view. While we have no faith to unfold the mysteries of the invisible world and search the deep things of God; no hope, to fling a ray of cheerfulness and trust across the darker portions of human life; no love, to unlock the secret of all hearts, and admit us to the Spirit of the universal Father; it is in vain that we call ourselves sons, for we have not the mind of God, we mistake our duties, and those that we perform we spoil by the unfilial way in which we render them as a service.

A sense of duty is indeed a precious and manly thing. But we need also holier sentiments, finer impulses, and more delicate and discriminating insight. In a word, the intellectual and moral are not enough ; we need the spiritual too, as the completion of our manhood and the crown of our sonship. Without this we are still in the dark, understanding not the things of the Spirit of God, and strangers to the deeper mysteries of the human heart. But the spiritual man discerns all things. He looks forth upon the world from a region far above the clouds of self ; and what he saw not in his intellectual wisdom, what he found not in his moral striving, is revealed to him on the watch-tower of faith. His heart, surrendered to the leading of Divine Love, is filled with peace, and upheld with a power which the fretful will had never known.

This view will be further corroborated by an examination of the father's reply, which could not, I think, have been couched in such tender terms if his son had been the hardened hypocrite which some commentators suppose him to have been. 'Son,' or we may correctly translate by the more endearing expression, 'My child, thou art ever with me.' The son ought to have esteemed it his highest privilege to be continually with his father, to see daily his affectionate smile, and to feel his unceasing care. He ought to have valued him above all those friends with whom he desired to make merry ; and to serve him, not in the spirit of a slave, but with cheerful heart and willing hand, ought to have been a perennial feast. And doubtless it would have been so, if the son had in the deepest sense been with his father. It is possible to be bodily

present with another, while the mind is far away. The enthusiast devoted to some plan for which no one cares, the religious reformer centuries in advance of his age, may see the same faces, clasp the same hands day by day, and yet who so lonely as they ?

Christ, surrounded by the shouting and triumphant throng, must have felt more alone than on the quiet, starlit mountain. Unless some cord of sympathy bind soul to soul, the outward contact is cold and barren, and we may be more truly with those who long ago have left the earth than with those even who eat of the same bread and drink of the same cup. So a son may have been ever with a father, and yet have never known him. In spirit they may be worlds asunder, because heart has never melted into heart, nor will into will, making the two men one, bound in an indissoluble chain of love. This is true also in our relation to God. With him we are at all times, for he 'knoweth our downsitting and our uprising; he understandeth our thoughts afar off. He compasseth our path and our lying down, and is acquainted with all our ways.' But are we with him spiritually ? Or do we serve him daily as though he were not near ? Do we keep his commandments as though he were a distant judge, who at sometime must give us a reward ? Do we yet know that to be with him inwardly, to have the angels of his love ascending and descending upon us, is higher than all other joy, and is not to be compared with any lower friendship ? Yes: to be with God, and not alone to serve him; to be one with him through the power of his Spirit in our hearts—this is the Christian life, the eternal heritage of the followers of Christ.

This thought is confirmed by the succeeding words—'All that I have is thine.' What a perfect communion is here signified! It is, then, our self-seeking that makes us so poor. We complain that we possess not so much as a kid to give us joy, and lo! the universe is ours, did we but know it. Living for ourselves we become poor indeed; but in God we may possess all things. For is not that a possession which comes with a gift of peace or gladness to our hearts? And when we love God, everything speaks to us of him. Nature yields up her mystic meanings. The glory of the Lord is revealed in earth and cloud. The springing grass; the lifeless stone, with its tale of ages gone; the song of birds, the beauty of the insect's wing; all come to us with a burden of ever fresh delight. Is not this the thought conveyed by Paul when he tells the Corinthian factions, each claiming a right of property in certain leaders, 'All things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come, all are yours'? And when the Apostle was chained, a poor and enfeebled prisoner in Rome, he could say, 'I have all and abound, I am full'; and every loving heart is continually full, being replenished from the treasure-house of God. But still deeper is the communion of spirit, the fellowship with the Father and the Son, of which John speaks, the partaking of the holiness of God. We are not to live as aliens in hard servitude, but to share his life, to receive a ray from his perfect light, to be sanctified with his unsullied purity, to glow with a flame of that love which is the essence of his being. It is our unfilial temper which deprives us of this infinite wealth. When

our wills, touched with the Spirit of adoption, have passed wholly into the Divine Will, then we shall say with Christ, 'All mine are thine, and thine are mine.' The words, in the Greek, are identical with those employed in the parable; only here it is the father that speaks of this wonderful communion, which the son, in the blindness of self-will, had refused. Oh! that the time may come when each of us, in the stillness of his heart, shall hear the words, 'My child, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.'

We must now briefly consider the concluding verse. 'It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad; for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again, and was lost, and is found.' The words 'thy brother' are significant. The elder son had not acknowledged the younger as a brother, but scornfully described him as 'this thy son.' But the father will not allow the connexion to be thus disowned. From this let us learn that the relation of brothers is inalienable, and however far our fellow men may have strayed, still we must admit that they are brethren, and must exhibit to the evil as well as the good a fraternal love. Thus imitating the perfection of our Father, we shall feel that it is meet to make merry and be glad when the penitent returns. His soul, enfeebled by sinful pursuits, needs an unwonted joy to sustain it. The power of temptation cannot in a moment be flung aside. The evil propensities which have been long cherished cannot be instantly subdued. And the spirit, when it first seeks the ways of God, requires an overpowering rapture to give energy and force to its new resolves. Never, therefore, is aspiration so ardent, or gratitude so intense. We

ought to assist at that festival of the new life; but we must not mourn because we cannot weep tears of such delicious joy, and our cooler temperament cannot attempt such a glowing strain. For this acute feeling is not the soul's lasting food. It is the tonic to revive its wasted strength. But there is a bliss which transcends the highest rapture. The calm communion, the love too constant ever to be an emotion, the peace of a nature in perfect harmony with God, this is the Christian's health, the condition in which he possesses the fullest power and the deepest life. Meekly, then, let us yield our wills to the Divine entreaty, and entering into our Father's mansion remain evermore with him.

Chapter XVII

PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Luke x. 30-37.

IN the interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan we may be guided both by the narrative itself and by the connexion in which it stands. From a careful consideration of these I am persuaded that the story sets forth a much grander truth, and one displaying more fully Christ's width of thought, than that which is usually accepted as the key to its explanation.

In order to have the case clearly before us, we must briefly review the facts. A certain lawyer stood up, tempting Jesus, or rather perhaps proving him, seeking to elicit his opinion. From what follows we cannot ascribe any evil motive to the lawyer, though he seems to have proposed his question, not because he valued Christ's opinion, but from a wish to see what kind of opinions this new teacher would inculcate. The lawyers were a class of men engaged in the interpretation of the ancient law, and were probably more attached to Scripture, and less to the traditions of the elders, than the Pharisees. It was easy, however, so to explain the law as to retain its letter and violate its

spirit. The question which the lawyer proposed was a searching one, calculated to draw forth from Jesus an answer embodying the essence of his doctrine—'What shall I do to inherit eternal life?' A man's reply to this question must contain his deepest thought, the central conception from which his whole system of faith and practice will spring. Jesus, instead of directly answering the question, appeals to the querist as one versed in the law—'What is written in the law? how readest thou?' The lawyer replies in the words of the two golden rules, which embody the universal spirit of both Judaism and Christianity. 'Thou hast answered rightly,' said Jesus, 'this do, and thou shalt live.'

The lawyer, apparently confused by the unexpectedness of the answer, was anxious to escape from a position which he felt to be awkward, and inquired 'Who is my neighbour?' It was easy to limit the obligation of the commandment by giving a narrow interpretation to the word neighbour; and among orthodox Jews the term was so defined as to exclude Gentiles and Samaritans. Had Jesus given a direct reply, he would probably have offended the prejudices of the lawyer, without at all convincing his judgment; and he therefore addresses to him a parable from which the lawyer could not fail to learn the opinion of Christ, while at the same time he was compelled to acknowledge its justice. The parable is briefly this—a Jew on his way to Jericho fell among robbers, who left him half dead upon the road. A priest and a levite, men in high religious position among the Jews, passed by him. But a Samaritan, one of a despised race, had compassion on him, and took care of him. 'Which of these,' asked Jesus, 'was

neighbour to him that fell among the thieves?' 'I suppose he that shewed mercy on him,' replied the unwilling lawyer. Jesus rejoined, 'Go, and do thou likewise.'

The explanation commonly given of this parable is, that it is intended to show the necessity of practical benevolence, in opposition to Jewish formalism and hypocrisy. To this interpretation there seem to me to be fatal objections, both from the nature of the parable itself, and still more from the connexion in which it is introduced.

Under the former head we may observe that the priest and the levite are nowhere else in the New Testament spoken of as representatives of formalism. The scribes and pharisees are those who make the word of God of none effect, and, while they are particular about mint and rue, pass by judgment and the love of God. When Christ would give a picture of false, in opposition to true prayer, it is a Pharisee, not a priest, that goes into the temple to pray. The priests on the other hand, are occasionally mentioned with respect. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews could hardly be so anxious to prove even figuratively the priesthood of Christ, if the early Christians had learned to regard that office as the type of a hollow and artificial religion. Here, then, if the usual explanation were correct, we should expect to find, not a priest and a levite, but a pharisee and a scribe. And, again, in this interpretation there seems to be very little point in introducing a Samaritan. Why should we not rather have a publican, as in the parable already alluded to? It is true, the benevolence of the Samaritan is enhanced by his kindness to a Jew, in whose mis-

fortunes he might be supposed to rejoice. But the lesson would be much more forcible if a Jew were represented as showing kindness to a Samaritan. Such is the nature of religious pride that it readily accepts what it would not for a moment bestow; and the lawyer might deem it very fitting that a contemptible Samaritan should serve a Jew, and yet imagine the case was quite altered when it became the turn of the orthodox Jew to benefit the God-rejected Samaritan.

But a more serious objection meets us in the connexion in which the parable occurs. It is told in reply to the question, 'Who is my neighbour?' In answer to this we expect something which may serve as a criterion of neighbourly relation; and to give instructions, however valuable, in what manner you are to prove your love to your neighbour, when you know him, is simply to give no reply whatever to the question. A definition of the word love would be interesting and precious; but the lawyer's objection turned, not upon the word love, but upon the word neighbour; and for Jesus to point out in reply the practical working of love would have been a mere evasion of the difficulty. In regard to the nature of neighbourly offices there is no evidence of any difference of opinion; for the lawyer did not consider it neighbourly in the priest and levite to pass their dying countryman. He desired to be informed, not how he was to act towards his neighbour, but whom he was to regard in that light.

Trench, in his valuable work on the parables, frankly admits the difficulty, and declares that the parable is 'no reply' to the question. He believes it to be in effect a rebuke of the question, teaching

that love does not pause to inquire whither it shall direct its energies, but pours itself forth freely upon all, asking, not 'Who is my neighbour?' but 'Whom can I benefit?' This is a striking and beautiful view. But it does not seem to me satisfactory. That Christ himself intended to answer the question is apparent from his words at the end of the parable: 'Which now of these three was neighbour to him that fell among the thieves?'—a query which certainly implies that one was more truly a neighbour, and therefore more worthy of love, than the other two, and appeals to the lawyer to determine which of the three it was. Besides, Christ does not appear ever to have inculcated this undiscriminating love. He does not require us to look upon the cruel murderer and the devoted saint as equally our brethren. No doubt, he enjoins upon us a love which will shed its beams on the evil and the good; yet he admits that some may legitimately be to us heathen men and publicans. And we cannot imagine that he himself recognized the same spiritual kindred in Judas and in John. We may yearn to do good to the most criminal, but we cannot feel bound to him by any holy communion. It is, therefore, no narrow and unloving spirit which prompts us to ask, who is in the highest sense our neighbour, with whom shall we clasp hands of fellowship, how shall we recognize those whom we ought to regard as most truly our brethren?

To present this thought more clearly, we may distinguish two kinds of love. There is the universal spirit of benevolence, which gushes forth to bless every object within its sphere, and glows with kindliness towards men of all conditions.

Besides this genial spirit, the effluence of a tender heart, there is a love which rests upon the real or supposed worth of its object, and tends to assimilate us to what we most revere in that object. This love indicates the tendency of our minds, declares what we most deeply prize, and shows what sort of men our affinities lead us to prefer as our associates. It exercises discrimination; and no one, I presume, will contend that we ought to accord it in equal measure to Herod and to Christ. That intimate blending of reverence and affection, which is the highest love possible to man, can be bestowed only upon those whom we deem worthy to receive it. The former kind of love we may feel towards the evil as well as the good, and prove it by our tenderness and justice; but in the latter sense this is obviously impossible. If, therefore, the parable were designed to recommend an undiscriminating love, it would seem to me to lack the sound wisdom elsewhere displayed by Christ. It is a matter that most gravely concerns us to know who are the most lovable, upon whom we ought to fix the strongest affections of our nature, a devotion which must help to mould our lives. If we accord that love to the low and base, our character will become as low and base as theirs; and if we bestow it upon the world's saints and prophets, we shall borrow from them a saintly glory. Far, then, from thinking that the question which the lawyer somewhat captiously proposed is one which could proceed only from a narrow soul bereft of real love, I would that we all asked it earnestly, desiring to receive a true reply. In the parable we are considering we have Christ's answer to this momentous question, and learn what

he regarded as the true ground of fellowship.

The lesson, then, of the parable may, I conceive, be briefly stated thus—a man's title to be received as a neighbour is to be determined, not by his country or his church, but by his goodness. Let us see how this lesson is derived from the story. A man going from Jerusalem, an expression which seems to imply that he was an inhabitant of that city, fell among thieves. A priest and a levite barbarously passed him by. A Samaritan tended him with unselfish and considerate kindness. Which was neighbour to the wounded traveller? All the lawyer's prejudices were in favour of the priest and levite. They were of the pure lineage of Abraham. They occupied a high religious position, and from the importance of their functions were entitled to the veneration of all true Israelites. If any man is entitled to the name of neighbour, is it not he who is bound to us by the ties of country and of faith? On the other hand, the Samaritan was thought to be excluded from the definition. He was an alien from the commonwealth of Israel, and his form of worship and imperfect creed marked him as a heretic, one rejected of God. Yet the facts were such that the lawyer, in spite of his prejudices, could not think the priest and levite as lovable as the Samaritan; and the confession was wrung from him that the hated and despised heretic was by the attraction of his goodness drawn into the community of neighbours, and deserved a love such as country and creed alone could never purchase.

When we accept this interpretation, the difficulties which before perplexed us disappear. All the particulars combine to present the lesson more

forcibly. The priest and levite no longer represent the formalist, but men belonging in an eminent degree to the same national and religious fraternity as the traveller who needed their assistance, men who, if neighbours were constituted by country or creed, would possess an indisputable claim to that honourable distinction. Observe too the point in introducing the Samaritan, a man whose very name was a byword among the Jews for all that was contemptible and profane. He appears before us with no recognized title to respect, with nothing but the simple majesty of his unpretending goodness. Yet even in so extreme a case goodness is triumphant, and is so presented as to penetrate the hard crust of prejudice, and open a new world of thought in the lawyer's mind. Henceforward, we will hope, he knew that there was something grander than descent from Abraham, or sacrificial pomp upon the chosen hill; that the spirit of goodness transcended all the boundaries of nation and of creed; and that wheresoever he found that spirit enshrined, there he must recognize a neighbour and a brother. Thus, too, the difficulty that the parable does not really answer the question is entirely removed. In this view the parable refers directly to the question proposed, neither evading nor rebuking it. It lays down the everlasting foundation of true fellowship; it tells whom we are most to love, and unfeignedly honour as our brethren.

The concluding words of the narrative may seem to favour the usual interpretation—'Go, and do thou likewise.' From this it may be inferred that Christ intended simply to teach a lesson of beneficence. But these words naturally refer to the

original question of the lawyer—'What shall I do to inherit eternal life?' The reply is, 'Think not to find eternal life in sectarian arrogance and exclusiveness, but cultivate within yourself the spirit of goodness exemplified in the hated and heretical Samaritan. That which leads you to revere him, and acknowledge him as a neighbour, is also the prime essential for yourself, and without this the pride of lineage and the boast of orthodoxy will avail you nothing.' Thus two vital truths are blended. We learn the one thing needful for our own everlasting welfare, and are taught to pay it the tribute of our love in whomsoever it may appear. Participation in the goodness and holiness of God is the only ground of eternal life, and, as a necessary consequence, a communion of the Holy Spirit is the one eternal bond of true brotherhood.

We see, then, that our spiritual sympathies ought to transcend the boundaries of nation and of creed. If we would take the lesson home to ourselves, for Samaritan we must substitute Mohammedan or Buddhist; for we must remember that Christ himself held the Samaritan's creed to be unsound, but contended that in spite of the falsity or imperfection of his worship his goodness placed him in a higher rank than those of unimpeachable faith who neglected the offices of kindness, and proved their hearts to be selfish and unloving. It is deeply significant that the Christian Church has given to this merciful man the name of the *Good* Samaritan, and, in a case where its prejudices are not involved, is content to admit his goodness alone as a just title to its love. But if we would carry out the principle, we must acknowledge that in Christ Jesus we are called not to occupy the narrow enclosure of a

sect, nor to determine our sympathies by agreement of opinion or by sameness of church or of country, but to feel ourselves members of a great confederacy of consecrated souls in every region of the world. In whomsoever we see love to God and love to man acting as living powers, in him we must own a brother, be the designation of his creed what it may.

But what advantage, then, has the Christian? Much everyway, chiefly because to him have been committed the glad tidings of a universal brotherhood resting on the basis of a common goodness. His peculiar privilege it is to proclaim the world's redemption from the shackles that have hung heavy on its conscience, and tied down its thought in base subjection to prejudice and fear. His especial prerogative it is to break down the middle walls of partition between sect and sect, between nation and nation, and enthrone the Spirit of Love as monarch of mankind. Surely this is an infinitely greater work than contending fiercely for a dogma, however true, and shutting up your sympathy from the good and holy whose creed you do not happen to approve.

Does any timid soul inquire, if we are thus to receive heretics and infidels as our brethren on the ground of a goodness which they may possess as well as we, do we not rob Christ of his glory, and place him on a par with other religious leaders? No: we can never glorify Christ by making him as blind and narrow as ourselves. We increase his glory a thousandfold when we own in him a power which can restrain our prejudice and enlarge our sympathy. We cannot dishonour him by recognizing in him a more universal spirit, a fuller in-

spiration, and a more comprehensive wisdom, than we had before imagined. The Christian Church has dimmed his glory, and obstructed the progress of his kingdom by breathing the spirit of the lawyer rather than that of its Lord. When we are willing to accept the principle laid down in the parable, and to proclaim a universal fraternity of the good, the Son of Man will come at last with power into the world, and gather all nations into his fold. If you would win for Christ an honour which none else can claim, be more holy, more just, more merciful, more loving than the followers of any other religious leader. When I imagine his saintly Spirit thus dwelling in his Church, and shining forth in the life of his disciples, I see a glory encircling him exceeding the radiance of the transfiguration, and know him, as never before, to be the Son of God, with power to heal and bless.

Chapter XVIII

THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT

Luke xi. 5-8.

SOME persons experience a difficulty in understanding this parable; for at first sight it seems to present an unworthy view of God. Can he be justly compared to a man who is capable of resisting the claims of friendship, but yields at last to a shameless importunity? And are we to suppose that his determinations can be altered by the mere obstinacy of human petitions? And, on the side of man, is it pious to decline the first answer that is given to his prayers, and to persist in demanding that which has been already refused? Is it not more consistent with devotion and humility to smother at once the desire which God hesitates to gratify than to clamour for our own way, regardless of his higher wisdom? These difficulties will vanish if we bear in mind that a parable need not exhibit its truth only through a resemblance between its imagery and the spiritual objects which it is intended to represent, but may also proceed by way of contrast or, as here, with mingled resemblance and contrast. In order to display the full power of entreaty Christ pictures

its working under the least favourable circumstances, and argues that, if even human selfishness and indolence can be overcome by importunate supplication, much more will the Giver of all good attend to the earnest longings of his children; and on the part of man, though we ought not to imitate the shamelessness (for such the Greek word implies) of him who desired to borrow the three loaves, we ought to be no less sincere and persevering in our search for spiritual good. These two truths, intimately related, and both needed in order to limit one another's range, are of the highest importance to our religious life. Let us view them in greater detail.

The main lesson, then, which the parable teaches is, that God is the hearer of prayer. Man is not alone in the world, cut off from all higher influences, and determining his own course as best he may within the limits of unconscious and unintelligent laws; but in prayer there is a real communion between the Divine and the human spirits, and through this communion a guidance and a power are obtained which are accessible in no other way, and which are simply unknown and inconceivable to the man who has never prayed. Christ does not attempt to meet the difficulties which have appeared to philosophical minds to lie in the way of this truth, nor does he determine the precise limits of this mysterious power in human life. He is content to argue from God's goodness that it must be so; for this goodness is more constantly present, more fully acquainted with our needs, and bound to us by a closer love, than is possible to any earthly friend or father. Shall evil man be unable to shut his heart against the claims of com-

passion, and persist in refusing help when the depth of want is proved by the urgency of petition, and yet shall the great Parent of all be deaf to our cry, and spurn our supplications from his presence? No, he despises not the broken and contrite heart, he helps our yearnings after truth, and gives his Holy Spirit to them that ask him. If we seek for any other evidence we may find it in the instincts of the pious heart. Prayer is of the deepest and most constant necessity to the religious life. To frame a satisfactory theory of it may be the most difficult problem in theology; but to live without it is the highest impossibility to the devout spirit.

But not only to the devout does prayer appear to be an instinct; even the sceptical and the wicked sometimes pray. And though our requests may often be very foolish, and though in his own wisdom and love God may often deny them, yet it cannot be for nothing that in every emergency the heart flies to its Creator; in peril imploring his protection; in sorrow, his sympathy and comfort; in sin, his forgiveness and reviving strength. But what says experience? Does prayer bring forth no fruit, or is it a daring flight of the soul into the heavens only that it may discover no God, and sink back discomfited into its own deadness? Let those who have prayed answer. Has there been no response, no voice breathing peace within? Has aspiration assumed in vain the wings of prayer? Have the tempted found no succour, the passion-tossed no subduing spell, the martyr no patient endurance? Has bereavement raised its clasped hands and streaming eyes to a sightless heaven, and brought down no holiness to soothe its pain and clothe its anguish in the garments of beauty

and blessedness? And on the humble level of daily duty does prayer add nothing to the sweetness, the faithfulness, and the sanctity of life? Is our course quite the same, whether we rush self-reliant to our tasks, or first bend the knee, and implore the aid and guidance of Him without whom we can do nothing? Surely the power of prayer is one of the most certain facts of experience. Awful and mysterious as such a gift may be, and undefined as may be its limits and uncertain its conditions, nothing in religion admits of less doubt than that in prayer man and God meet one another, and our heavenly Father gives his Holy Spirit to them that ask him. Without this, religion would be desolate, an aspiration without a goal, a hope so wasted as only to beget the consciousness of despair, a love clad in the weeds of perpetual mourning.

It is strange with how little force we embrace this truth, a truth which we admit, even believe, yet seldom rest in with the full assurance of faith. That the infinite Father is at all times nearer to every one of us than priest or ritual can ever bring him; that he is shut out from us, not by his reluctance, but by our self-will; that we may, in the submissive attitude of prayer, hear, even in faintest tones, the counsels of unerring wisdom, and feel a more than earthly peace stealing over the disordered passions and affections of our hearts—than this no truth can be more sublime, none possess a greater practical importance. If this privilege be indeed ours, then we are worse than 'fools and blind' while we keep ourselves aloof, and proudly say, we will be our own masters, and follow our own witty inventions. Voluntarily cutting ourselves off from

the light of life, it is not wonderful that we so often exchange our real greatness for its frivolous counterfeit, and endeavour to lull the deathless yearnings of the soul with the deceitful blandishments of earth. Man lacks his true dignity, and, while he boasts of his sharp sight, walks in darkness and knows not whither he goes, till he has learned to pray. Alas! how many discover this truth when it is too late, and consume their hearts in unavailing regrets that their life has been wasted through the ignorance of a shallow and unsubmissive pride. But if we avail ourselves as we ought of the privilege which is accorded to us, if we come daily to the primal Fount of being, and, with deep sense of our own helplessness and blindness, implore the aid of him whose word can give light to our path, and whose quickening Spirit can summon our dead souls from the dark grave of their sin, what limit can we set to our progress in holiness and wisdom? How superior to the world, how simple and pure in our tastes, how just in our judgments, how large in our views, how earnest and self-denying in good works, may we become. Ever drawing nearer to him, ever more imbued with the Spirit of his Son, may we not attain at last that perfect communion in which we cannot sin because we are born of God? May not these bodies be redeemed, and become tabernacles of that eternal life which is with the Father, and once at least has been made manifest in human form? Thus sanctified as temples of the Holy Spirit, we should exhibit no longer the defacing marks of foolish desires and passions, but the beauty of celestial goodness, the perfect harmony of the Divine will.

But there is another side of this truth; for it

may fairly be urged that these last remarks transcend the limits of experience. Is there not in the religious life such a thing as baffled hope? Is there no sense of estrangement, no seeking after God attended by at least apparent failure to find him? What mean the words of the Psalmist, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent.' Are we not compelled to deplore the repetition of sins against which we have often prayed? And sometimes do not our prayers fall coldly back into our own bosoms? Like the friend at midnight we must wait in darkness; or, like the blind by the wayside, listening to the eager crowd trampling past, and in their own satisfaction bidding us not to trouble him, we must raise a long and piteous cry before our wants are supplied. It cannot, however, be from any reluctance to bless that God, who 'giveth liberally to all men, and upbraideth not,' thus holds his gifts in reserve; and we may readily discover some reasons which may help to account for this trial of our faith.

In the first place, our disappointment often arises from our expecting too much. The law of gradual progress appears to be almost universal in the providence of God; and the formation of character and the growth of spiritual affection constitute no exception to the general rule. In prayer we seek to realize an ideal holiness so transcendently beyond our present attainments that it would be a departure from the usual Divine method completely to satisfy our wants. If we reflect that when we pray for the Holy Spirit we

ask for all that is grandest in character, loftiest in truth, most ennobling and wonderful in the relation between God and man, we shall not be surprised that so much is withheld, but that so much is given. If God lavished upon us all his blessings at once, we should not appreciate at its true value the greatness of his love, but receive the light of his Spirit with the same unconcern with which we open our eyes to receive the light of day; but when he adds little by little to our store of spiritual wealth, and, after long expectancy, gladdens us with some fresh gift, our faculties are more on the alert, and we estimate more justly the immensity of his goodness.

I fear that in the sinking of our hearts at the apparent rejection of our prayers for spiritual graces there is often much ingratitude, and that in our pursuit of spiritual good we have the same grasping desire of mere personal satisfaction which we sometimes deplore in the pursuit of material good. Not that we may be at peace, but that God may be glorified; not that we may occupy an eminent place among his saints, but that we may be fitted for the work which he assigns us, and enabled to discharge the humblest duties in conformity with his will, should we pray for a fuller indwelling of his love. Here too we must be content with whatever it pleases him to bestow; for we are not worthy so much as to hear the distant murmur of his voice, much less to bear his Spirit in our hearts. Did we pray thus, remembering how great is the least of God's gifts, and rejoicing if we might but receive of the crumbs which fall from his children's table, we should cease to complain of unanswered prayers, and begin to adore him for the exceeding riches of his love.

Another reason why the gifts of the Spirit so often seem to be denied to our prayers may be this, that our earnestness may be thereby tested and increased. It is not intended that we should win the race or bear away the trophy, without an effort; nor does God respond to the inconstant fancies of a momentary devotion, but to our deep and abiding desires. How often do we come before God with cold, formal petitions, which express neither the desire of our hearts nor the bent of our wills, and perhaps secretly hoping that he will not make clearer the duty or the self-sacrifice which we already fear that he may expect at our hands.

We whose needs are so great, and on whose course such vast issues may depend, do not implore the Divine assistance with half the earnestness with which the man in the parable, disconcerted merely by the unexpected arrival of a guest, importuned his friend for three loaves; and yet we expect in reply, not bread that perishes, but the bread of eternal life. Surely we ought not to complain if we have to prove our sincerity by our perseverance, and to seek through years of patient toil and waiting the priceless pearl of Christian truth and righteousness. God has not forsaken us; but now bestowing richest blessings, and again seeming to withdraw, he would stimulate our efforts and give a more living earnestness to our prayers. Often the answer might be returned, 'Thou meanest not what thou sayest; thy worship is on the lips only: I have sent thee, and thou didst refuse to go; I have warned thee, and thou didst not hear; thy cross has been appointed thee; put thy hand to it, and then I will give thee strength to bear it.' Yes, the fault is in ourselves, and if, when we stretch

forth our hands, he will not hear, it is because we are unfaithful; and when we come with surrendered will, uttering not the smooth commonplace, but the inward sighings of the spirit, we shall receive abundantly what he knows that we truly need.

Lastly, the apparent reluctance in granting our prayers may be intended to give us a profounder humility. Could we weep away our failings once for all in an agony of contrite prayer, we might soon forget our dependence; and so, while we lopped off some of the tokens of sin, we should retain the evil itself in its inmost seat. For the wrong acts which we commit are but the signs of the disease within; and so long as there is a turning of the heart from God, a proud confidence in ourselves, and a determination to choose our own course, we have still the bitter root of wrong-doing. And who knows not that men may be vain of their spiritual gifts, and, with strange self-deception, may mingle admiration of themselves with their worship of God? Many a rough jar against our self-complacency must be endured before we contentedly assume the garment of humility. For a moment we lean upon God, and are strong; but soon we think within ourselves, this might is our own; and in the very thought our strength vanishes, and we fall miserably before the first temptation. Then only are our wills really strong when we rest in him; and it is in mercy that he sometimes seems so far from the voice of our supplication, in order that we may learn our dependence, and surrender our pride at last.

Chapter XIX

PARABLE OF THE UNJUST JUDGE

Luke xviii. 2-5.

THIS parable is introduced by the words, 'He spake a parable unto them to the end that they ought always to pray, and not to faint.' It appears, from the connexion in which it is recorded, to have referred originally to the great crisis in human affairs which was expected at no distant date. It was to be a time of terrible trial, like the days of the deluge, when the dearest friends should be torn asunder, and one should be taken, and another left. Amid the horrors of this new judgment coming upon the sinful world the faith even of the elect might be shaken, and they might be tempted to think that God had forgotten them, while the persecutor triumphed and righteousness seemed long delayed. Hence Jesus asks with sorrowful anticipations, 'When the Son of Man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?' In order to encourage his disciples, and prepare them for the arduous struggle that was before them, he relates a parable intended to illustrate the power of prayer. Though thus designed for a special occasion, it contains a lesson which is generally applicable; and we may consider it in its wider bearings.

Many readers of this parable, supposing that God is compared to an unjust judge, have felt, in considering it, a difficulty similar to that which we encountered in the parable of the friend at midnight. But, as we have seen, this kind of difficulty arises from the habit of neglecting the main purpose of the parable, and endeavouring to attach a distinct spiritual meaning to each of the persons and events appearing in it. A parable may convey its lesson not only by way of resemblance, but by way of contrast, and thus contain an implied argument, which is rendered more effective by being presented through an illustrative story. Christ more than once uses this kind of argument from contrast. Thus he appeals to the natural instincts of a parent, and infers that if we, being evil, give good gifts to our children, much more will the heavenly Father, who is not evil, give good things to them that ask him. Again, he points out that the claims of compassion may be met by pulling an ox or an ass out of a pit on the sabbath day, and concludes that he may release from her infirmity on the sabbath day a daughter of Abraham, who is so much more precious than a beast.

These examples may illustrate the argument from contrast, which is found in a few of the parables, and is presented in its strongest form in the parable before us. The object is to show the power of entreaty under the least favourable conditions; and for this purpose the contrasts are as marked as they can be made. Instead of the just and merciful God we have a judge who is altogether unfit for his high office. He is not swayed either by the fear of God, by whom even judges will be judged, nor by that regard for the opinion of

his neighbours, which generally has some influence over the unprincipled. Indeed so depraved is he that he is quite conscious of his own callousness, and apparently glories in it, for he says within himself, 'I fear not God, nor regard man.' Thus he is as unlike the supreme Judge as he can possibly be, and quite disinclined to give himself any trouble which he can avoid in the administration of justice. And now he is approached, not by a wealthy and powerful suitor, who might appeal to his interests, but by a widow, the type, in the East, of the forlorn and defenceless, and therefore one from whom he had nothing to fear, and whom he could neglect with impunity. She was suffering from the injustice of some adversary; in what way we are not told, for that did not affect the point of the story. It is enough that she was one who could appeal both to the justice and the compassion of the judge; but he was inaccessible to such pleas, and she had no resource but her own earnest and persevering entreaty. At length he yields to selfishness what he had refused to higher sentiments. He exaggerates the annoyance which he felt at her frequent supplications into fear of personal violence (for that is implied by the Greek word), and determines to rid himself of her by doing her justice.

In the application the characters are strongly contrasted with those in the parable. Instead of an unjust and selfish judge we have the merciful Father in heaven; and in place of the widow, towards whom the judge would have no natural regard, we have the chosen ones of God, men to whom he had already made manifest his love in the spiritual depths of their being, and who might

therefore trust that, even when appearances were unfavourable, he would never desert them. The question which Christ asks by way of appeal to his disciples suggests these contrasts, and the general meaning is sufficiently clear; but the final clause is very obscure, and, perhaps, for this reason, there are two slightly different readings in the Greek manuscripts. One of these is represented by our authorized version, 'though he bear long with them.' The word 'them' grammatically refers to the elect; but as the word translated 'bear long' is used elsewhere of the patience with which God postpones the punishment of the guilty, so as to leave them time to repent, it seems necessary, in spite of the grammatical difficulty, to understand by 'them' the adversaries who were oppressing the elect.

Then the sense will be, that though God, through his long-suffering towards the sinful, may seem to neglect the just cause of the righteous, yet in reality he will avenge them speedily. To the suffering the time of endurance seems long, and yet, in the measures of eternity, it may be but for a moment.

The other reading, which is supported by the best authorities, is preferred by our Revisers; but what is meant by their translation, which can hardly be regarded as English, I am at a loss to understand.[1] Probably with this reading it is best to give a somewhat modified meaning to the Greek verb, and to include it in the question—'shall not God avenge his elect, . . . and is he dilatory in their case?' To which the reply is

[1] 'Shall not God avenge his elect, . . . and he is long-suffering over them?'

given, 'he will avenge them speedily.' In this translation, too, it is implied that there will be an appearance of delay, and that the righteous who cry to God day and night will be tempted to think that he does not regard their prayer, but from the Divine point of view the answer will be swift.

Now let us glance at some of the more general applications of the parable. The main lesson for ourselves is this, that we must be earnest and persevering in prayer, and not faint in it because for a time it seems as though we were not heard. Great is the power of entreaty, and God's love is a pledge that he will answer us in the time and manner that seem to him best. The answer often seems long delayed, and in our impatience we say in our hearts, it is of no use to pray; I cry unto thee day and night, but thou hearest not. And yet this apparent delay may be no more than is needful to prove the depth and sincerity of our desire and our faith. It is not in response to transient aspirations and cold and hasty prayers that God bestows his highest gifts, but only to the deep longing of the soul, offered in daily sacrifice, and in gratitude for the smallest tokens of Divine grace and love. But often the delay is only apparent, and we are not aware that the answer has come speedily, because, like nature's blessings, it comes so softly and silently that we heed it not.

We are often, I think, misled, and tempted to lose our faith, because we expect the answer to prayer to be something sudden and miraculous, and do not reflect that God may answer us through the slow action of those permanent and universal laws which are the expression of his unchanging will. These laws appear to us slow in their opera-

tion because they work out their stupendous results, condensing nebulae, forming suns and worlds, producing animals and the souls of men, step by step, through vast reaches of time, amid which the duration of our fleeting lives sinks into insignificance. So it is even to our limited thought; but when we try to pass beyond the confines of our knowledge, and grasp the idea of eternity, we see that fast and slow are only relative to us, and that in the great world-process and in the Divine consciousness a thousand ages may be as one day. If this be so, the results of our education under the Spirit of God may be, to our apprehension, far distant, and yet the Divine energy may be silently working in us in answer to every prayer, and leading us by imperceptible steps towards the glory of immortal sons of God. In prayer we surrender ourselves to the Divine will, and we cannot breathe an aspiration without passing into nearer harmony with God, and becoming more susceptible to the action of those spiritual laws by which we are slowly trained into perfect righteousness. Thus there is an instantaneous answer to prayer, as certain as the action of any natural law; and we are often unconscious of it because it seems so natural, and because the result which we have in view can only be wrought out in the quiet growth of the spirit.

We may take one or two examples. Let us suppose that we have been excited by some strong passion, say a vehement resentment, which we know to be inconsistent with our Christian faith. If we have been seriously injured, our resentment is natural, and is not easily subdued. We are tempted to nourish it by dwelling on the ill-treat-

ment we have received, and then try to justify it by painting in the blackest colours the character of him who has offended us. But if we recognize the truth that this resentful, and therefore exaggerated and unjust view of our neighbour is a worse enemy than he who has aroused our anger, we shall seek in prayer for that higher spirit which brings the peace of an unconquerable love into the restless heart. Then is there not an immediate answer? For in the very act of prayer we are lifted into a calmer region, where our selfish storms cannot enter. It may be that the victory is evanescent, and when we come down from our communion with God the glory fades from our face, and the evil spirit is admitted once more; and under the stress of conflict we exclaim that we have prayed in vain, and God has not heard. But would it not be truer to say that the answer has been according to our prayer? A moment's surrender of the will in humility and sorrow, a momentary cry to the God of our salvation, has taken away some of the bitterness from our hearts; and though the time may be far distant when we shall be all holy within, a pure and perfect temple for the indwelling of the Spirit of God, yet, whenever and so long as we pray, the grace of God descends upon the heart, and works, if with what appears to us the slowness, nevertheless with the certainty of all Divine laws towards the accomplishment of the intended result. Let us pray, and not faint, and at last the heavenly Spirit will come no more in fitful visits, but will make its abode with us, and the old worldly and selfish passions will trouble us no more.

Or, again, we have been crushed by some sorrow,

which seems to cast a dark and unmeaning shadow on our lives. How shall we meet it? With despair and defiance, or with trust and resignation? Sorrow may have two opposite effects on the character, but cannot leave it untouched. It is properly spoken of as a trial, proving what sort of men we are. It is by no means invariably the case that it softens and ennobles; sometimes it produces only depression and bitterness. Men have even been driven to a complete disbelief in providence because a terrible rent has been made in the smooth texture of their lives, and such a rent seems to betoken no loving and fatherly hand. Yet this is a time when they ought always to pray and not faint, in order that the unknown purpose of God may be fulfilled, and sorrow may bear a Divine fruit. And if we pray, surrendering our own will, and seeking only for wisdom and trust to use the discipline of life aright, is there not an immediate response? Not that our grief is taken away, but it loses its selfishness, and becomes holy, and so acts as a loving angel to guide us into nearer communion with God, and, instead of plunging us into unbelief, deepens our faith. But in order that patience may have its perfect work we must pray and pray again; for not till we have proved our constancy will God pour forth the full treasure of his blessings. To us the time may seem long before the veil is withdrawn from the mystery of our sorrow; and yet that muffled sorrow may bring some Divine light to our hearts every time that we turn to God in the communion of prayer.

Or, once more, we may be engaged in some labour which we believe may be for the public good, and help to bring nearer the kingdom of God

upon earth. But how slow, how very slow, the progress of mankind appears; and how often we are tempted to sit down in despondency, and exclaim, O Lord, I have laboured in vain, and spent my strength for nought, and the prayer which I raised for the increase of truth and goodness has fallen unheeded to the ground. Yet it cannot be so. We are liable in these things to the illusions of sense; for we cannot take hold of the results of spiritual endeavour, and, placing them in our balance, determine their amount. They are among the things which eye cannot see or ear hear. But if in the physical world the most distant stars are connected by subtle ties with our little planet, may we not believe that in the spiritual world no endeavour can be lost, but in ways which we cannot discern life passes from heart to heart, the fervour even of private adoration raises the moral temperature of the universe, and the prayer of intercession sends a tremor across the spiritual spaces into far distant souls? Yes, the kingdom of God may seem always to float before us, a vision which we cannot grasp, and yet every prayer we breathe may be answered speedily, and take its place among the vital forces which determine the destiny of our world.

If the view which I have taken be correct, it is clear that we are not to pray with equal earnestness for whatever we happen to desire. Selfish prayers, instead of falling in with the spiritual laws of God, jar against them, and can no more bring us into communion with God than sitting in a dark cellar can cheer us with the warmth and light of the sun. There is no real prayer without a surrender of the will. Our most constant and

earnest prayer, therefore, must be for the utter abandonment of ourselves to those high and controlling powers which God sends forth to draw us to himself, and to fix in our hearts the impress of his Spirit. And if, amid the necessities of our mortal life, we descend to lower things, we must always temper our prayers with a humble sense of our ignorance of what is best for us, and with submission to the supreme wisdom and love. In all that concerns our earthly lot we must follow the prayer in Gethsemane—if it be possible, grant us these blessings; yet not our will, but thine be done.

And hence we derive a rule for the regulation of desire. If there are prayers in which we may not imitate the importunity of the widow, but rather submit ourselves to the decision of the judge whom we know to be just, so there are desires which ought not to outrun the importunity of prayer. Some desires we could not for shame turn into prayers, and we can mention them in our communion with God only that they may be consumed, and changed into worthier aspirations. And others, which are not in themselves unworthy, we must cherish with a reverent self-control; and only in those higher yearnings of the spirit, whereby God draws us to himself, can we find the true and permanent end of our being, for which we must cry day and night. Thus he who would *always* pray and not faint must keep a holy constraint upon his desires, and maintain that calm and equable state of mind which befits the hour of prayer. Not through a Stoical scorn and repression of those passions and affections which God has planted in our nature, not through ascetic self-torture which distrusts the Divine discipline of

our ordinary life, but through an exaltation of spirit, which, rapt into still and constant communion, flings its own sanctity and beauty down over the lower desires, are we to attain the sweet contentment and purity of heart which distinguish the children of God.

But can we pray always ? It is impossible for us to do so in the formal sense which we so commonly attach to prayer. But it is not impossible to remember God in all our doings, and lift the cry of the soul for his help and blessing. Prayer is the turning of the spirit in trust and love towards God. It is the channel of communion between us and him, the Jacob's ladder by which the angels of God ascend and descend upon the son of man, bearing to the loving heart of God the sighings and aspirations of his children, and bringing back messages of peace and gifts of grace wonderful in their beauty, jewels that gleam with the light of heaven. It is well, in our weakness, that we should have special times for prayer, but not that through these we should limit in our thought the operation of God. God is everywhere, and the man of pure and humble mind carries about with him his own temple and offers up continually the secret sacrifice of prayer; and continually he hears the Divine voice responsive to his inward cry, and sees manifested on the altar of his heart the presence of the eternal Spirit. If we could see these things as they really are, and not come to life's problems with such blind and thankless hearts, so far from imagining that our prayers are not answered, we should be astonished at the riches of the heavenly blessings that are showered upon us, the answer so full and free to our poor cold petitions. Yes, God is not

as an unjust judge, whose reluctance must be overcome by importunity, but the Father of mercies, from whom comes down every good and perfect gift. And so we may come to him in faith, lift our hearts to heaven in humble and holy love, and always pray and not faint.

Chapter XX

PARABLE OF THE UNJUST STEWARD

Luke xvi. 1-7.

THIS parable affords another example of teaching by contrast, or rather by a mixture of resemblance and contrast. The general meaning is sufficiently clear: we ought in the spiritual field to imitate the prudence which the unrighteous man exercises in regard to his worldly interests. But in the remarks which follow the parable other lessons seem to be included, and the final inference is that 'ye cannot serve God and mammon.' The parable itself and the instructions which follow present many difficulties, which have given rise to various interpretations. We must be content here to follow the line of thought which appears the most probable.

A steward was one who had the entire management of a rich man's property, and therefore had ample opportunity for maladministration. There is no suggestion in the narrative that the steward is intended to represent any particular man, or any particular party, such as the Pharisees. Rather he represents in one respect the whole human race; for he is in a position of trust, which

he may fill worthily or unworthily. He is accused of wasting, or, more literally, 'scattering' his employer's property. There is no charge of dishonesty; he has simply been careless, and neglected his trust. But when his unfaithfulness has ruined his prospects, he tries to retrieve his position by downright cheating, currying favour by taking a large percentage off the enormous debts which were due to the estate. Having been unrighteous in little he has become unrighteous in much. Thus neglect of duty may lead to crime, as many a gambler has been seduced by his losses to become a swindler.

We are told that 'his lord commended the unrighteous steward because he had done wisely.' I think this translation is rather misleading; for commending generally implies approval, and to act wisely is to act well. This is not implied by the Greek, which only suggests that the steward was praised for his prudence or cleverness, without conveying any approval of his conduct. You may praise the shrewdness of a rogue without sanctioning his roguery.

The remarks which follow the parable seem to indicate that its main purpose was to inculcate the exercise of a worthy prudence in the employment of pecuniary wealth. This wealth is described as 'the mammon of unrighteousness.' The grammatical construction is exactly the same as in the phrase translated 'the unrighteous steward,' so that we might fairly translate 'the unrighteous mammon.' That expression occurs in verse 11, and is there contrasted with the true or genuine riches. It is therefore the mammon itself that is unrighteous, in the sense of being

transient and deceitful. Nevertheless it enters into all civilized life, and we have to use it, whether well or ill. It is, however, not strictly our own, but a trust, in which we must prove our fidelity. It is a very little thing in comparison with the great concerns of the spirit, that wealth which is really our own, and cannot be taken from us by the shocks and changes of fortune. But that little proves our characters, and the faithfulness or unfaithfulness with which we discharge this trust will run through the whole of our conduct. The manner in which money is to be used is suggested, but not worked out in detail. We are to make friends by means of it, that, when it shall fail, they may receive us into the eternal tabernacles. This exhortation is rather obscure, but apparently means that our money is not to be spent selfishly, with a sole view to our own worldly advantage, but so as to promote the general welfare, and make friends by its kindly and beneficent use. And then, when it fails, as fail it must at death, we shall be welcomed into the eternal world by those who have experienced our thoughtfulness and love.

Chapter XXI

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

Luke xvi. 19-31.

THIS parable may seem, at first sight, to imply that a rich man will be condemned simply because he was rich, and a poor man will be accepted simply because he was poor; for nothing is said about the moral qualities of the two men. This impression, however, disappears when we consider the occasion on which the parable is said to have been spoken, and the fairly obvious suggestions of the parable itself. Jesus, as we have seen, had been pointing out, in connexion with the parable of the unjust steward, the need of fidelity in the use of money, which must be held as a trust from God, and distinguished from the genuine wealth, which is spiritual, not material. Some of his hearers who were covetous derided him. They justified themselves before men, and deemed themselves superior to others because they had great possessions. Now, in all ages men have been far too commonly estimated by their worldly wealth. Great deference is shown to the rich which is denied to the very poor; and even the disciples

were so astonished at hearing that it was difficult for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God that they asked who in that case could be saved. The object of the parable, then, is to show, not that poverty is more meritorious than wealth, but that wealth is not the true standard of judgment, and that the relative positions of the rich and the poor may quite possibly be reversed in the judgment of God. The moral conditions of approval are the same in both cases, and are amply set forth in other parts of Christ's teaching; but they are not the subject of the present parable, and are therefore not insisted on, though they are not obscurely implied.

That the parable was not directed against the mere possession of wealth is apparent from the selection of Abraham as the chief figure in the realm of the blessed; for Abraham, according to the record in Genesis, was a rich and powerful chief. The rich man is not, indeed, directly charged with any overt sin; but his whole history is told in the account of his selfish luxury, and his disregard of the misery at his doors. No doubt he thought himself a very great person, with his regal attire of purple and fine linen, and his sumptuous table, and would have made a great display in honour of some judge or king, while he contemptuously threw some scraps to the starving Lazarus. He was one of those who, in the great judgment scene, are condemned because they neglected the offices of kindness and love towards the poor and suffering. Surely all moralists will agree that that man deserves to suffer of whom nothing can be told but that he spent his life in idle and useless enjoyment. Happily there have been many rich men of a very different kind, who are remembered,

not for their wealth, but for their noble character, their generous philanthropy, their wise thought for human good; and they will be found among the 'blessed of the Father' in the kingdom of spiritual worth.

Of the character of Lazarus nothing is said; for, in his case, the lesson of the story is that poverty is not in itself any disqualification for the kingdom of God, and that in the court of heaven the positions of the rich and the poor may be reversed. But we may fairly suppose that he is regarded as bearing his sufferings patiently and receiving with thankfulness the crumbs with which he tries to assuage his hunger. There is, no doubt, the idea of compensation in the words of Abraham; but who will say that there is not great and wonderful compensation when the suffering and sorrow of this world have been faithfully borne, and the parting clouds of earth reveal the radiance of eternity?

The future condition of the two men is represented by means of imaginative scenery which would appeal to the hearts of Jewish listeners. To be in Abraham's bosom was to share the virtue and felicity of the great founder of the nation. Even the rich man addresses him as 'father Abraham,' and relies upon his pity. Abraham makes a gentle reply, calling him 'child,' and bringing the past to his remembrance. He then shows that there is an impassable gulf between selfishness and love. In the literal sense, we may believe that Lazarus would gladly have brought water to cool the rich man's tongue; but virtue cannot be transferred, and the flame of remorse must be endured. May we not trust that it is a purifying

flame? For the sufferer, forgetting himself for a moment, takes thought for his five brothers. They, however, have sufficient light, and, if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither would they be persuaded if one rose from the dead. So we must all tread faithfully the beaten road which God appoints, and not try to excuse our failure on the ground that God has not startled us by some miraculous portent into a knowledge of his will.

Chapter XXII

THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL

Luke xii. 16-20.

THIS parable relates to the uncertainty of riches as a reason for not coveting them. If we correctly assume that there is no break in the narrative, it was called forth by an unseemly interruption of a very solemn discourse. We may suppose that the interrupter was smarting under a grievance, and that his brother was dishonestly withholding his share of the inheritance. He may have thought that the great teacher of morality would rebuke the offender, and must have been surprised when the rebuke was directed against himself, and Jesus somewhat sharply declined the office of arbitrator in a private dispute. Christ embraced the opportunity of warning the people against 'all covetousness.' The word 'all' suggests, I think, a condemnation of the covetous spirit even when our claim is just; for life, the interior vital principle, is our supreme wealth, and does not consist in the abundance of our possessions, so that, when the heart is turned with evil desire towards the latter, we are sacrificing the higher to the lower. The parable is then told, in

order to illustrate the folly of fixing all one's desire upon earthly goods. We may have to quit them in an instant, and our souls pass in spiritual destitution into the unseen world. 'So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.' These words do not condemn the possession of treasure, but the accumulation of it for selfish ends, and the neglect of the enduring wealth which is beyond the reach of moth and thief. We may make friends of earthly riches, and so use them as to enlarge the soul.[1]

[1] For the Christian view of Riches, see the chapter on Covetousness in connexion with the Sermon on the Mount: *The Way of Life*, Vol. 2.

Chapter XXIII

THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN

Luke xviii. 10-14.

IN order to understand in its full force the lesson of this parable we must glance at the characters of the Pharisees and the publicans as they appeared to the eyes of their contemporaries. With us the name Pharisee has become a byword, expressive of all that is most hypocritical and formal in religion. As a class the Pharisees are exposed to the natural dislike of Christians; for we regard them as the foremost enemies of Christ, men who pursued him with the most pertinacious malignity, and finally compassed his death. We imagine them practising cunning artifices to conceal their bad doings, and pretending to be religious with the deliberate purpose of imposing upon others. Whatever truth there may be in this conception of their characters, nothing can be more unlike the ideas entertained about them when they were alive. They then stood high in public estimation. They led frugal and moral lives, and were regarded as men bound by rules of peculiar sanctity. They observed with the strictest severity all the ordinances of religion, and multiplied

ceremonial usages to prove their devotion to God. The word Pharisee, instead of suggesting nothing but hypocrisy and malice, conveyed ideas of superior holiness and virtue, so that even Paul remembered his Pharisaism among the high distinctions which he 'counted loss for Christ.'[1]

The name 'publican,' on the other hand, immediately awakened feelings of scorn and loathing. The publicans, so often mentioned in connexion with the life of Christ, were custom-house officers, in the employment of those who had contracted to collect the Roman taxes. They were usually natives of the country where they carried on their business, and belonged to a low class. They had it in their power to be overbearing and fraudulent, exacting more than their due, and bringing false charges of smuggling, when it was cheaper to purchase silence than to rely on the justice of a tribunal. In all countries they were hated, and not least in Palestine. There they were regarded as traitors, who played into the hands of the oppressor and the heathen. Men of respectability shunned their company; and they were generally ranked with the most degraded of society.

If, then, we would apply the parable to our own time, and take home its lesson to our hearts, we must understand by Pharisee a member of a class which stands high in general estimation, and most completely satisfies in its outward life the conscience of the community, and by publican one taken from the lowest end of the social scale, where sin does not care to conceal itself, and where those who are most hopeful of human nature would hardly think of looking for a saint.

[1] Philip. iii. 7.

From the outward aspect we must now turn to the inward character of the two men. Whether pharisaic boastfulness ever expressed itself so unblushingly as in this parable may perhaps be doubted. A bad spirit usually conceals itself under some elegant circumlocution, and does not present itself in a form so bald and repulsive. The temper in which one who was outwardly a Pharisee might approach his God is here stripped of its adornments, and allowed to exhibit itself in plain and unmistakable language. No one now uses this precise form of thanksgiving; but of how many hearts is it the secret thought! Let us endeavour to penetrate to its animating spirit.

The most striking characteristic of the Pharisee betrayed in this prayer is his complete self-satisfaction. No contrition, no sense of dependence, no aspiration even, is apparent. He has attained the very summit of his wishes, and his only religion consists in thanking God that he is such a perfect man. Now observe, no intimation is given by Christ that the boast was in any respect untrue. Falsehood was not the sin of the Pharisee. He *had* fulfilled the requirements of his own moral code, and in comparison with the publican was respectability itself. His sin was the want of humility. He looked up to no perfection higher than his own.

When he drew near to God, it was not that he might adore an infinite and undeserved love, it was not that he might abase himself before unclouded holiness, and implore some richer gift of the Spirit, but that he might pamper his own petty conceit, and worship his own restricted goodness. There cannot be imagined a more complete inver-

sion of the true relation between man and God than ensues when we allow self-glorification to creep into our prayers. Nothing could be more incongruous than that a creature whose lifetime is but a moment in the great eternity, whose largest knowledge can only cast a wistful look at the vast unexplored ocean of being, and whose highest goodness bears traces of earthly stains and limitations, should thus exalt himself in presence of Him before whom the inhabitants of the world are as grasshoppers, to whom the utterances of prophet and sage are as the lispings of childhood, and whose wisdom and love are the only source whence insect, man, and angel, can draw the streams of life.

The natural concomitant of this self-laudatory disposition is contempt towards others. The Pharisee not only plumed himself upon his own virtue, but looked down with scorn upon the sins of the rest of mankind. Human vanity can maintain itself only by depreciating that with which it comes most naturally into comparison. Let any man look up to the absolutely Good and Wise, and remember that the only question for him to consider lies between his soul and God, and that moment vanity must disappear. But the vain man will not thus look up; he searches out the defects of those beneath him, and finds reason to rejoice that he is not like them. There is too a strange self-deception which beguiles many. We have a false consciousness of virtue when we pass a severe censure upon sins which we were never tempted to commit. We feel as if we were vindicators of the moral law, and were animated by a holy indignation. But we are mistaken. Virtue consists not in approving the things that are more

excellent, but in choosing them at some cost to ourselves. The man whom we condemn, and from whose deeds we recoil with horror, is indeed to blame; but are not we to blame? We have not committed his sins; but we have committed our own, perhaps with less temptation, and bearing perhaps a blacker mark of guilt in the sight of God.

It is a matter for far deeper thankfulness than the Pharisee supposed that we are not extortioners, unjust, adulterers. Have we been tempted to these evils? Have we been clutched in a deadly wrestle with sin, and come off victorious? If not, we are falsely ascribing merit to ourselves in fulfilling the requirements of justice and honour. Did we know the treachery of our own hearts, did we feel how little progress we have made in proportion to our opportunities, we should not despise others. Censoriousness is no characteristic of real virtue. It marks rather the shallow mind, ignorant of its own danger and defects. The truly spiritual know that they share the same frail nature with the sinful, and must offer with them the same prayer for pardon. Before God we must all wear the same suppliant look, and for every shade of outward guilt the voice of penitence speaks in the same tones. Even he who was without sin knew the fellowship of our temptations; and those whom a sanctimonious society despised experienced his prompt and tender sympathy. In him there is no contempt, but the sorrow of one who knew what was in man, and could detect through the sordid clothing and coarse features some promise of good within; and publicans accustomed to pharisaic taunts recovered their self-respect as they listened to his words.

We must learn to love men, not to despise them.

The virtue of which the Pharisee made his boast requires a moment's notice. His morality is negative, his religion formal. He abstains from the grosser kinds of wickedness; he fasts oftener than the law enjoins, and pays tithes of all that he acquires. This is what we might expect of one whose affections are centred in himself, and whose life has no Divine root. He has no diffusive goodness, no desire to bless, no work to fulfil which only God's help can bring to a successful issue. So it will ever be with those who trust in themselves that they are righteous, and forget that only in communion with God can virtue become a Divine and creative power. How many are there who bear their heads aloft in society, and think proudly that no blot rests upon their fair fame, who yet know nothing of the real nature of goodness, and whose cold hearts have never forgotten themselves in a glow of disinterested love. Self-complacency is a certain bar to all progress. Pride yourself on your exemption from error and your sagacious discernment of truth, and a whole world of light will be hidden from your blinded eyes. Be secretly satisfied with your well-ordered life, so free from the stains which defile your neighbour's character, and goodness will sit sadly without, and the world experience no healing efficacy in your presence. Esteem yourself highly because you strictly observe religious practices, and no saintliness will ever fructify your barren soul. The world is led on to God by men of a far different stamp from these, men who fear that when they have preached the gospel to others they may themselves be outcasts, men who feel

that without God they can do nothing, and that the highest attainments and the noblest forms of virtue are but deceitful semblances till they have been consecrated to Him, and derive from Him their daily inspiration. The thick veil of self-conceit must be rent, and allow the light of Divine truth and love to enter, before our righteousness can be anything but the cold and negative result of a heart which dreads nothing but the shock of a disreputable sin.

Thus the Pharisee was not justified in his prayer. He carried back to his house a heart smaller and more withered than he had taken to the temple. No consciousness of forgiving and sanctifying mercy filled his soul. No tenderness towards others arose from his glad experience of God's patience with himself. No fresh goodness entered into him, making him an instrument for accomplishing nobler ends. He was content with himself; and to his own impotence he was left.

In the publican we observe the reverse of all this. Every circumstance marks his unaffected humility. He stood afar off. He came shyly and timidly, fearing to mingle with the crowd of more frequent worshippers, and shrinking from too near a contact with a place so holy. One whose life had been so sinful was not worthy to be there. His eyes were cast down, and in the vehemence of his emotion he smote upon his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner.' The original is even more expressive, 'be propitious to me *the* sinner,' as though among all who thronged the temple precincts he was the one sinner who most needed God's compassion. So far was he from despising others that every one seemed better than himself.

Is not this the language of true penitence? No sins can look so black as our own. We have tasted all their bitterness. We, and we alone, know how we have slighted God's goodness, and rebelled against his holy will. Others, we think, must be purer than we, and nearer the perfection for which we were created. It is well that we can think so, or we should sometimes despair of human nature, that strange, wayward thing, so perverse and passionate, so blindly wilful, so full of high imaginings and mean performances, so far from the calm, meek dignity of sons of God. But in the publican's prayer we obtain our justification and our peace. We lose ourselves in the immensity of God's love, which rests even upon us; and when we lay upon the altar the sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart, we are nearer Him than when, proud and irreproachable, we deem that we have no need of repentance.

To sum up, God judges us by that which is within, not by that which is without. No formal and conventional goodness, however it may win the plaudits of society, will render us acceptable to Him. He requires the heart. No meaner sacrifice will suffice; and we can bring no greater, for it is all we have. The righteousness which springs from pride, or usage, or a desire to secure the favour of our fellow men, will prove a broken reed, in that day when one by one our souls shall pass before Him for judgment. Alas! for us if then for the first time conscience awakes, and brings that impeachment which makes the boldest grow pale. We know not whither we go when we trust in ourselves that we are righteous. To rest trustfully in Him who can 'justify the ungodly,' to feel that

there is not an hour's safety for us away from the sustaining power of his Spirit, to lose our self-will in reverent love to Him who alone is holy, this is man's truest wisdom. The respectable outward life which only inflates us with a sense of superiority will not sustain us amid unforeseen temptations and sorrows. The soul must give itself to God, and find its life in his infinite love. And then in humility it will bring forth the genuine fruits of righteousness; and looking away from its own vain strivings and imperfect holiness to Him from whom the true Spirit of Life must come, it will be filled with a peace which passes understanding, and glory no longer in the feeble and inconstant ray of its own goodness, but in the boundless light of God's unchanging love.

Chapter XXIV

PARABLE OF THE BARREN FIG TREE

Luke xiii. 6-9.

THIS parable was called forth by a reference to two disasters, by which people's minds were excited, as they are still by any unusual calamity. According to the prevalent opinion these disasters were a judgment upon the sufferers for their inordinate wickedness. Jesus, without denying that they were a judgment upon sin, declared that they were only a sample of what would befall the entire nation, if it did not repent. This seems to imply the belief, which is not fully expressed, that the accidental sufferings of individuals are not to be regarded as a penal judgment against these particular men, and that nevertheless, in the large procedure of providence, there is a real connexion between sin and suffering. Like the ancient prophets, he saw in the moral deterioration of his country the sure harbinger of its ruin; but, through the mercy of God, there was still time for repentance before the irrevocable judgment fell. The parable, then, relates to the 'goodness and severity of God' (Romans xi. 22), goodness and long-suffering in leading to repentance, severity

when the lengthened time of probation was past (see Romans ii. 4-10).

The vineyard is a common figure, and might, in the present instance, be suggested by Isaiah v. 1-7. In the parable its meaning is uncertain. It generally represents 'the house of Israel'; and if it does so here, the fig tree may stand for Jerusalem, or for 'the men of Judah, his pleasant plant' (Isaiah v. 7). Some suppose that, since the fig tree denotes Israel, the vineyard must mean the world; but this is so contrary to usage as to be improbable. No stress is laid upon it, and it may be introduced simply as the natural place for a man to have a fig tree; for vineyards were not limited to the cultivation of the vine.

It may be doubted whether under the figure of the vinedresser Christ referred to any particular person. It has been supposed that he referred to himself, as the great intercessor for guilty man. But although the parable was suggested by the circumstances of the time, it expresses a general fact in the administration of the world, the postponement of retribution as long as there is any hope of repentance; and Jesus may have thought of the pleading of Abraham for Sodom, and of many utterances of the ancient Psalmists and Prophets. As the vinedresser wishes to give the tree another chance, so the messengers of God call upon a corrupt society to repent, and stimulate its efforts towards a nobler life. The result of the appeal is left uncertain; for the possibility of rising to better things is still open. It may be that a guilty nation will repent, and the forces of good prevail; but if, with a false sense of security, it glories in its wrongdoing, and thinks it is such a

favourite of God that he looks with complacency on its worthless life, then, when every plea has been exhausted, the punishment, so long delayed, must fall, and the corruption be removed to make way for nobler growths.

Chapter XXV

THE FAITHFUL AND UNFAITHFUL SERVANTS

Matthew xxiv. 45-51 ; *Luke* xii. 42-46.

THIS parable forms a portion of a long discourse, extending, in Matthew, through nearly two chapters, and may be regarded as an introduction to the magnificent group of parables contained in the twenty-fifth chapter, two of which, as expressly relating to the kingdom of God, have been already considered. The entire discourse is couched in a prophetic strain ; and in accordance with the diverse theological views of commentators, and the various opinions which they entertain as to the nature of prophecy, it has received widely different interpretations.

Some, trusting the infallibility of the speaker and of the record, refer the whole of the address to the destruction of Jerusalem and the events which immediately accompanied it. If we accept the fundamental assumption, it may fairly be urged in support of this view that there is no apparent break in the discourse, where we can imagine the speaker to have suddenly passed on to remote ages, and

conducted his hearers from the ruined city to that awful day of the Lord when all mankind shall have played out the drama of mortality. The only natural impression is that Jesus speaks of one continuous series of events, which were all to occur in the time of some who were then living. Yet it appears forced to refer, if not all the parables, at least the description of the judgment of all nations before the Son of Man surrounded by his angels, to the destruction of Jerusalem. Admitting the language to be in the highest degree figurative, no such universal judgment took place at that precise period as to justify so glowing a description.

Others, accordingly, suppose that, although it is unmarked, there is nevertheless a transition from the appalling crisis of Jewish history to the more solemn crisis of all human affairs. Eternity is supposed to yield up, under the spell of these chapters, some of its most impenetrable secrets. The Son of Man is to return in person at an unexpected moment, and, clothed at last in the terrors of inexorable justice, assert that supremacy over the whole earth which none will any longer dare to dispute. The world will be put upon its trial on a certain definite day; the good will be welcomed to everlasting glory, and the wicked gnash their teeth as they pass to their everlasting doom. In favour of this opinion it may be said that Jesus has never yet returned, and the judgment so solemnly set forth has never occurred; and, therefore, all that is most interesting to us in these chapters must still be hidden in the dim future. It is, however, a strong objection to such an interpretation that the coming of the Son of Man and the gathering together of his elect are mentioned just before

the declaration that that generation should not pass till all these things were fulfilled.

Other critics, while agreeing with those first named in explaining the passage literally, decline to follow them in referring all the circumstances to the period about the overthrow of Jerusalem. They find it necessary, therefore, to suppose that Jesus was mistaken in some of his expectations; and while they are of opinion that anything apparently prophetic was invented for him after the events, they think that even he had not escaped from the Jewish belief in a temporal Messiahship, but anticipated his return after a few years to claim that throne of which the malignity of his countrymen could deprive him only for a season. This view, it appears to me, is inconsistent with what we know, from other portions of the record, of the character of Christ and his modes of thought; and considering with what clearness he expresses in many parts of his teaching his own more spiritual ideas, it is fair to regard with suspicion the few passages in which he apparently lends a sanction to the popular conception. It is indeed probable that he used words which seemed to justify the prevalent belief of the first generation of disciples that their Lord would soon return in person to establish his kingdom; for without some such sanction it is difficult to understand the universality of that expectation. But the Apostles being full of Jewish Messianic hopes, may have misunderstood him, and after the lapse of many years his language may, quite unintentionally, have been coloured by those who put it upon record, and believed that their expectations were fully justified. Some element of uncertainty seems involved in the

fact, that, in spite of the record, Christianity survived the disappearance of the early apocalyptic hopes.

Even as it stands, the discourse is not expressed in such dry prosaic style as to compel us to believe that the coming of the Son of Man denotes any visible event. The convulsed heavens; the sun and moon refusing to give their light; the falling stars; the cloudy pomp from which the Son of Man shall come, like lightning darting from east to west; the host of angels, summoning with a trumpet's mighty voice the elect from end to end of heaven; the numerous illustrations which are introduced, passing at length into finished parables, and finally bursting into that grand description of the judgment, in which the rules of the parable seem too confined for the speaker's soaring thought —all these justify us in believing that we have here a highly poetic account of the establishment of the new spiritual kingdom, and an exposition of some of the great laws by which it would be governed.

It may assist us to form a correct view if we endeavour to recall the scene. Jesus was now on his last visit to Jerusalem. He was more than ever impressed with the hollowness and corrupting influence of the pharisaical religion. The light that was in his nation had become darkness. There was much zeal, but little of that righteousness which is the only solid ground of a people's prosperity. Religion was a show and pretence; kindling evil passions rather than subduing them; particular about external observances, and scandalized at the blasphemy of one who imagined that God could speak still, as in former days, to the human soul, and that his Spirit there had a

greater authority than rabbinical enactments or sabbatarian scruples, but passing by with excuses, malevolence, covetousness, and sensuality. Hypocrites were honoured, and the guiltless were condemned. Such a state of things could not endure. There was an eternal justice on high that would not be mocked. The city which had filled up the measure of its iniquity must perish. That gorgeous Temple, with its snowy marble and golden offerings, symbolizing as it did an outward, local, and temporary religion, must fall before a spiritual rule which would encircle the world, and last as long as the soul of man.

But meanwhile Jesus resolved to bear his testimony, and utter his emphatic warning. His compassionate and peaceful spirit did not shrink from the task. Terrible is the exposure of the scribes and Pharisees contained in the speech which he addressed, apparently within the Temple precincts, to the multitude and his disciples; most explicit, and shielded by no politely elegant phrase, his threatening of the judgment which was sure to come. All the intolerance, perversity, and wickedness of past generations reached their climax in this. On this lay the blood of all the prophets; how could it escape? Suddenly his voice changes. He had spoken for conscience, and delivered his message; and instantly the feelings of the man, the patriot, the sympathizing friend rush in. It was his own country that thus courted its ruin; and as he thinks of the house of Israel left desolate, of Jerusalem despoiled, he concludes with an apostrophe of most touching pathos.

When he departed from the Temple, his disciples, who must have been wonderfully little impressed

by what he had said, and may have found in it only stimulus for their Messianic dreams, appear to have been lost in admiration of the splendid structure, which may have seemed to them a noble monument of religious earnestness, and calculated to defy the hand of time. They pressed upon him to call his attention to the buildings. But his mind was full of other things. He saw a spiritual temple rising on the ruins of the old and earthly, and he replied to the importunity of his disciples in one of his short abrupt sentences—'Verily I say unto you, there shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.' These startling and decisive words took effect. The disciples were now anxious to learn something more of this impending calamity; and when they had retired to the Mount of Olives, and could look down on the beautiful city, unmolested by the multitudes which had assembled for the celebration of the Passover, they asked him—'Tell us, when shall these things be, and what is the sign of thy coming, and of the completion of the age?' In answer to this question he poured forth the thoughts, the feelings, and the warnings which crowded on his mind.

Judged by the rules of our colder temperament, the answer may not be satisfactory. We might prefer a precise statement of isolated facts to the richly coloured delineation of immutable principles. But Jesus pursued his usual course, and instead of submitting to his disciples a formal statement of his doctrines upon speculative points, he endeavoured to prepare their minds for the dangers of the time, and impress upon them the moral lessons which they most needed to strengthen

them; and while so doing he allowed his fervid imagination to employ some of those glowing figures which are not unusual in the East. That some of his words may have been misunderstood, and nurtured fruitless expectations in the minds of the first Christians, is, as we have already remarked, by no means impossible. But let it be remembered that the spiritual only can apprehend the spiritual, and a more exact account, clashing with deeply rooted prejudices, might have produced even a less correct impression.

The question of the disciples seems to have struck Jesus with an instant fear that their worldly notions of the Messiah might expose them to the greatest error; and his very first words discountenance the expectation that he would reappear among them in human form, and restore the kingdom to Israel—'Take heed lest anyone deceive you; for many shall come in my name, saying, I am the Christ, and shall deceive many.' A time of awful trial was approaching. The consequences of sin would come with inevitable horror. 'The abomination of desolation' should stand even 'in the holy place.' The nation, longing for the promised Deliverer, would accord a ready welcome to many a false prophet. Even those who had professed a nobler faith would be tempted to succumb, while they sighed for his appearance to turn back the sword of the invader. But if they heard that he was in the desert, or in the secret chamber, they must not believe it. It was not thus that he would return, to be an earthly prince, the redeemer of a single people. He would come like the lightning, illumining the world from east to west. He would come enthroned upon the clouds,

encompassed with power and glory, and sending angels to execute his will; and his chosen ones should be gathered from the four winds, from end to end of heaven.

Their faith, then, must not fail, though the skies should be darkened, and the affrighted stars forget their appointed course. Let them learn from the fig tree its parable. Just as surely as its sprouting leaves indicated the approaching summer, the fearful calamities which were needed to clear away the corruptions of the past would show that the kingdom of heaven was at the doors. Heaven and earth should pass away, rather than these words (the noble utterance of a faith which no disastrous winter could chill) be unfulfilled. 'But,' he added, in emphatic answer to their precise question, 'of that day and hour no one knoweth, not even the angels of heaven, but the Father alone.' It concerned them not to know the time. This uncertainty constituted the trial of their faith. Men would go on in heedless security, till judgment swept down upon them, and cut them off in their sins. To be watchful, to live as though the crisis of fate were ever close at hand, would be their only safeguard. They ought to be vigilant as a householder who knows that a burglar will attempt to break into his house. They ought to be faithful and prudent, like a servant whom, as a reward for his fidelity, his master promotes to be manager of all his goods. They must not imitate a bad servant who, in fancied security, ill-treats his fellow servants, and abandons himself to gluttony and drunkenness, whose recompense it is to be surprised by his master in the midst of his revellings, and receive the merited punishment of a

hypocrite. This vigilant faithfulness would for ever be required in the kingdom of heaven. The flame of the spiritual life must receive no careless attention. Every talent must be diligently employed. And under that new rule men would be tested, not by the smoke of their sacrifices or the splendour of their temple, but by their zealous fulfilment of the law of love.

This brief survey may sufficiently explain the immediate reference of the parable of the servants. But the lesson contained in it, the need of constant vigilance on account of the trials and uncertainties of life, is of no narrow or partial application. The destruction of Jerusalem is but an example of the punishment which is sure to descend upon national corruption. So long as States deliberately nurse a sin in their bosom, so long as the rod of oppression is wielded, so long as the strict laws of integrity are set at defiance, patriotism made subservient to party interests, bribery allowed to dictate the course of politics, or ambition to disregard international obligations, the world will be subject to these terrible catastrophes; and our boasted age writes in tears and blood its testimony to this imperishable truth.

In these convulsions the innocent are necessarily involved with the guilty. The sons of God must bear their cross, and virtue weep forth its agony. None of us can tell when some great national trial may prove us every one, and require us each to show what spirit we are of. Certainly our best safeguard is to be faithful to the duties of the hour, and each to maintain in his own person the national righteousness. We are all responsible for the moral tone of society. It may be difficult or impossible

to attach to each individual the precise measure of his responsibility; but if we refuse to look great evils in the face, or pretend that they are no concern of ours, and go on selfishly eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, while we touch not the social burden with one of our fingers, we are treasuring up wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God. Many sins grow to gigantic proportions because we do not feel our individual responsibility, and carelessly throw upon that abstract thing, society, an evil which we dislike, but have not the courage to resist. It is so bound up in our social life, so universally recognized and understood, that few dare to make a stand, and incur the odium and loss which must inevitably fall upon them. In this way, for instance, men who desire to be honest submit to the malpractices of trade, relieving their consciences for a time by ridiculing moralists as unpractical dreamers. Men who themselves are not vicious associate on cordial terms with those who they know are violating one of God's most sacred laws. And we are all too apt contentedly to ignore the unseen mass of ignorance and depravity which is nurturing we know not what of future crime and misery, in which the whole body politic may be involved. We must not allow the indifference of society to blind our hearts. The more any sin is interwoven with the whole tissue of the nation's life, the more imperative it is that we should oppose it with manly front. If the moral tone of society become relaxed, if petty lying and dishonesty meet with anything but uncompromising rebuke, if men are to grow up fancying that self-indulgence is the end of life, and they are not the

subjects of an eternal law, we know not how soon we ourselves may have to taste the poisoned fruit. Alas! in fearful and unexpected forms the retribution comes, not upon those who were sinners above all their fellow citizens, but as an impressive warning to everyone whose heart is not surrendered to the will of God. We know not what house the avenging angel may enter next, and present to its inmates the bitterest draught. Watch, therefore, for we know not when the Lord of righteousness will make his presence felt.

Passing to the field of our private life, we know how many uncertainties there are to make us thoughtful and vigilant. At present our life may be flowing smoothly on, congenial friends around us, every desire fulfilled. But who can tell how soon this may change, and, like Job, we may be sorely tried. A reverse of fortune may mock the labour of years, and compel us to begin once more to toil wearily up the ascent. Or one whom we loved may disappoint our fondest hopes, and deny us that sympathy and comfort to which we are justly entitled. Or the necessities of life may drive us far away from our old home, and plunge us suddenly into temptations, with none to counsel us or share our responsibility. Or an accident may stretch us helpless on our couch, there to await through the long years that glorified body which death alone can bring. Or sickness may enter our dwelling, and lay its destroying finger on one who is dear to us as the air we breathe, and days and nights of watching end only in baffled hope, leaving us alone with our dead. These are among the things that may find us unprepared. And when the heart has not in truth given itself to God,

they are often fraught with ruin. How many could trace the blighted promise of their lives to a disappointed hope? How many who, in secret vice, are drinking their energies away, would ascribe to a sudden blow of fortune their first indulgence in that deadly consolation? How many would attribute their disregard of religion to some grievous unkindness? Should we have borne such trials better? If it pleased God to thwart our hopes, to resume one of his most precious gifts, should we bow submissively to his will, and in cherishing holy memories become holier ourselves? Blessed are we if it be so. Then trial will only confirm our fidelity, and in sundering the ties of earth bind us more indissolubly to heaven. Whatever may await us, let us be found watching; and though our hearts may be sore pained within us, let us seek our consolation in God, and not in the world. And then he will make us rulers in his spiritual household, prompt to dispense the living bread, and administer the oil and wine of comfort. In him, then, let us trust, while we watch and pray; for we know not the day nor the hour when the fire of affliction shall burn.

Need I refer, in conclusion, to that crisis from which there is no escape? Prosperity and ease may attend us to the end; but death no man can hope to shun. How shall we receive it? Calmly, meekly, fulfilling our appointed duties, or full of worldly thoughts, and indifferent to the laws of God? No man, however pure, would willingly die in his worst moments; for the thought of death makes too vivid the presence of supreme holiness. What shall we say for ourselves? Alas! with every effort, what can we say, but that we are un-

profitable servants, that humbly relying on God we have striven to do our duty? But what will the untruthful, the selfish, the proud, the flippant, the dishonest, the sensual, say? Why should not their portion be appointed with the hypocrites? We know not the day nor the hour when our account must be rendered. It may be years hence; it may be to-day. Let us not thrust from our minds a disagreeable thought, saying that our Lord delays his coming. To all the careless he will come in a day that they look not for him, and in an hour that they are not aware of; and their heedless gaiety will not turn him back. Watch, therefore, and be ready. The present moment alone is ours. 'Now is the accepted time; now is the day of salvation.'

Chapter XXVI

THE JUDGMENT OF ALL NATIONS

Matthew xxv. 31-46.

THIS noble description of the judgment of the world has the mingled character of apocalypse and parable. It is apocalyptic in speaking of the Son of Man as seated on the throne of his glory; the shepherd, with his sheep and goats, and the king, introduce slightly confused elements of parable. The whole exhibits a scenic representation of the Divine principle by which the worthy are distinguished from the unworthy; and we must seek in it a revelation of spiritual law, not of obscure matters of fact. We only sacrifice the spirit to the letter when we use it as a magical formula whereby to disclose the hidden events of the future. There is a very interesting parallel in the Talmud,[1] where it is said that 'In the future age the blessed God will take the Book of the Law into his bosom, and say "Whoever has engaged in this Law, let him come here and receive his reward."' The nations come up in succession, plead their cause, and are rejected. It seems clearly to be the author's intention to describe, not the literal mode,

[1] 'Abodah Zarah 2a, b.

but the principles of judgment. The purpose of the present passage is similar. Such grandiose descriptions are for the imagination, while their permanent lesson is contained in the kernel of spiritual thought. We must, therefore, expect to derive from this picture of universal judgment, not the gratification of an idle curiosity, but an understanding of the abiding principle by which men are received or rejected in the kingdom of God.

According to this view the judgment is going on at the present time; and we are each estimated by God, and receiving his approval or condemnation, in conformity with the law which is here set forth. And wherever the Son of Man, the ideal representative of the highest type of humanity, appears in spirit, he sits upon the throne of his glory, and assigns men their places with an absolute disregard of all conventional and temporary distinctions, and guided by only one just rule. We may even go further, and say that all his holy angels, all men who are imbued with his spirit, acquiesce in his judgment, and frame their opinion of their fellow men apart from all personal considerations, and in strict conformity with the Divine standard. In proportion as the kingdom of heaven is established among us, the arbitrary divisions created by human ignorance and presumption disappear; rank, wealth, and genius cease to be an apology for laxity of morals, and orthodox profession fails to conceal the selfish heart. If, then, we would know by what law the approval and disapproval of God are governed, and by what rule we should regulate our own estimate of others, we cannot ponder too carefully the lesson here enforced.

What, then, is this lesson? Is it not this, that

love, producing deeds of kindness and mercy, is necessary to our acceptance with God, and is sufficient for that acceptance? We need not suppose that the whole circle of Christian duty is here described; but as Christ elsewhere says that men shall be known by their fruits, so here he exemplifies the nature of those fruits which furnish the most convincing testimony of the state of our hearts. Yet these examples have a more comprehensive bearing than at first we might attribute to them; and though no direct mention is made of our more private and personal duty, their significance is not confined to mere social kindliness. Is not the Christian life essentially a surrender of self to a higher than self? Is it not true that nothing so completely alienates us from God as the presence of self-will in any of its forms? Let a man turn his look within, and seek mainly his own gratification, and admire chiefly his own greatness, and the spirit of worship is gone, and with it all chance of real greatness or goodness. As we grow larger in our own eyes, we grow smaller in the sight of God. As we heap up pleasures for ourselves, and become indifferent to the happiness of others, a cloud falls between us and him whose name is Love. It is a participation in his Spirit that constitutes us his children. Every sun that rises to illumine lives so ill-deserving, every cooling shower that makes the flowers and leaves glisten with tears of grateful joy, bears witness that we are not his, if we have yielded to pride, ill-temper, or resentment, or have selfishly abstained from some act of generosity, or steeled our hearts against another's suffering. 'He that loveth not knoweth not God.' 'He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in

darkness even until now.' And 'hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit.' No other genuine means have we of judging whether God's approval rests upon us. No fleshly descent from Abraham, no formal connexion with the Christian Church, nothing outside our own souls, can ensure the favour of God. Only our own vanquished evil, and the indwelling of his goodness, can testify that we belong to him. Here alone we find our salvation and our everlasting peace.

Some characteristics of Christian love are brought out in a striking and interesting way in the passage under consideration.

This love is not passive in its nature, but prompts to acts of kindness involving trouble and self-sacrifice. The conduct so beautifully alluded to implies far more than a diffusive friendliness towards the universe at large. It indicates a disposition to grapple with actual evils, and to exert oneself for the relief of individual cases of distress. There is a geniality of manner which is quite compatible with real selfishness. A natural softness and tenderness may be combined with a disinclination to interrupt one's own ease for the sake of others; and that urbanity which is simply the result of fine culture is an untrustworthy evidence of the spirit of self-denial. In Christian teaching so much importance is attached to what may be termed the passive virtues that we are liable to deceive ourselves in this respect. These may denote, not the energy of our faith, but our constitutional insensibility and lack of force. If it has always been easy for us to overlook offences, to be patient under insult, and to maintain a

winning courtesy towards men of all conditions, then our so acting is no proof that we have dedicated ourselves to a higher Will than our own.

If we would evince such self-surrender, we must put forth some self-denying energy, and our attitude towards our fellow men must be something more than one void of offence. There is, indeed, a gentleness which bears the marks of power, because it is a trophy of self-conquest. A temper which, having been originally irritable and imperious, becomes distinguished by calmness and serenity shows that religion has worked mightily within. But one who has thus gained the softer virtues by conflict with his own impulses will not be content with his hard-won gentleness, or shrink from the fatigue of doing good. He has been trained in the severest school of self-denial; for it is comparatively easy to give away what you do not need, or to indulge your benevolence without sacrificing your pride; but to tame your own fierce passions, to lay the heavy hand of duty upon your resentment and dislike, and insist that they shall transform themselves into love—this is like tearing your nature up by the roots that you may plant it in a holier soil. A devotion which has accomplished this will dare even to penetrate behind the prison door, and look upon the criminal with a brother's eye. It will tell the sick where fortitude is to be found; and the hungry, the thirsty, and the naked will rejoice in its effectual sympathy.

It is cheering to think how extensively religion has imbued the public conscience with a disposition to promote charitable works, and how the nation, cities, and various associations have provided means

for relieving and elevating the poorer portion of the community, and even those in prison are not forgotten by the philanthropy of our time. But we must apply the test to our own hearts. Are we individually contributing to the happiness of mankind? Do we in anything deny ourselves that others may rejoice? Is any gratification laid on one side, any expense restricted, any luxury resigned, that we may have ampler means to bless? Christian love is above all things earnest. No cross can turn it from the fulfilment of its gracious designs. Its meat is to work the Father's will.

Yet, on the other hand, we must not suppose that some great and striking achievement is needed for the exercise of our love. Now and then a gifted man may be required to engage in an enterprise with wide and far reaching results in relation to human welfare. But the generality of mankind have not the ability or opportunity to undertake such extensive schemes, and their love may be manifested towards one of the least of Christ's brethren. The moral value of an act depends, not on the object towards which it is directed, but on the spirit from which it flows. He who pours the balm of comfort upon a wounded heart that beats beneath roughest raiment is as blessed in his deed as Mary anointing the Saviour's feet with precious ointment. Man looks on the outward appearance; God looks upon the heart. And those who neglect the lowly, the weak, and the despised, while they lavish all their courtesy upon the great and powerful, will be rejected in the last day.

How many are there who would minister to Christ now, and spend half their fortune for his

sumptuous entertainment, were he to appear in his glory, who would have helped to crucify him when he was known only as a poor carpenter? But the voice of adulation will not deceive the great king. Those who neglect the least neglect him; for they have not his love in their hearts. We should consider this carefully. There is a fashion in doing good, which may win the applause of men. We ought to do good where none but God can know our self-denial, our struggles with our own lower nature, our earnest, humble prayers. What if we begin by simply resolving to make our homes happier? Is there nothing in us that sometimes casts a cloud upon their brightness? Have we that gentle and quiet spirit which diffuses itself as an atmosphere of peace upon all around? And beyond the circle of our homes let not the left hand know what the right hand doeth. Give where no return can be made, and thanks can hardly be spoken. Let the most needy taste the richest fruits of our kindness. Let the soul of love, found in communion with God and submission to his will, flow forth simply and unostentatiously, even as God pours abroad the light, rejoicing millions of hearts, and shedding it on rich and poor, on small and great, with impartial glory.

For its unconscious simplicity is one of the most exquisite charms of Christian love. The righteous with wonder hear themselves styled 'the blessed of my Father,' and ask, as if deprecating such a title of honour, 'Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger and took thee in? or naked and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick or in prison, and came unto thee?'

How little they thought, as they dealt out their bread to the hungry, that they were feeding him who had fed their souls with the bread of life. Their goodness was too deep, too dependent upon God, to allow them to suppose that it could be so highly esteemed. Love never thinks that it has done enough. The spirit which boasts of its large sacrifices and the extent of its charities is not love, but a counterfeit hiding its self-seeking under a cloak. What is the greatest sacrifice in return for all that God has given us? When we have done all, we have done only that which it was our duty to do. Our brightest goodness is but a little trembling ray from the infinite Light. And even this denotes what might be, rather than what already is. Our life here is an aspiration. When we laud ourselves, and think we have already attained, we have lost sight of the glory on high. Gazing on that, we feel our own darkness; and when a voice of mercy descends, 'Come ye blessed of my Father,' we can only wonder and adore.

The reward and punishment consequent on the mode of life require a brief notice. 'As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are sons of God,' and 'if sons, then heirs.' A kingdom of righteousness and bliss has been prepared from the foundation of the world for all God's faithful children. Man has been created in the image of God; and when he submits himself to the guidance of his Father's Spirit, and enters the kingdom of light, he is but fulfilling the original purpose of his being, and assuming an inheritance intended for him from the first. There is a destiny of unimagined glory for the human soul. The heights of holiness, devotion, and love in that eternal kingdom no

mortal eye may explore, no mortal tongue describe. But hoping yet to put on robes of sinless purity, and to pay an unwavering allegiance to the supreme Will, let us with patience wait for that day. 'Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.'

But though the kingdom of heaven is our inheritance, and if we fulfil the laws of our being we shall attain to the full privileges of sons, we yet may be disinherited. There is a lower kingdom of sin and misery, which was never designed for man, but which man may wilfully prefer. The loving, who think little of their own happiness, and are ever ready to deny their own wishes, are full of serenity; but the selfish are consumed by a fiery discontent, which even in the fruition of their desires does not cease to burn. There is no tyrant so implacable as self. The more costly the gifts you bestow upon him, the more grasping is his greed. He has no loveliness, no gratitude. Strip off his tinsel, and he becomes a hideous monster; and when you have laid down your very soul at his feet, he will but spurn you, and send you off a shivering slave, fit subject of a kingdom 'prepared for the devil and his angels.'

A question has been earnestly raised whether this punishment is to endure for ever. The word by which it is characterized is not so strict in its meaning as our word 'everlasting'; and it would hardly be fair to assert that in employing it Christ, or rather the Greek editor of his words, had the idea of eternity distinctly present to his mind.

The duration of the punishment is quite a sub-

sidiary thought, and the main purpose of the passage is to point out the immeasurable gulf between the loving and the selfish, and the awful difference between their respective destinies. The accepted and the condemned are assigned their due positions in the world which we habitually speak of as eternal in contradistinction to the present, and then the scene closes. We must, however, say that Christ does not, either here or elsewhere, contradict the voice of conscience, and sanction the idea that sin is only good disguised under an ugly shape. He does not maintain that you may lead a selfish, brutal, or sensual life, that you may defy all the pleadings of God's love, and harden yourself against his will, and that God will nevertheless force you to become a saint at last. Let us not deceive ourselves with dreams, and forget facts. We know that God is Love; but we also know that sin is opposition to his will, that it estranges our hearts from him, that it falls with the blackness of night across our spiritual vision, that it withers our best affections, and the longer it is persisted in renders return more and more difficult. That God yet loves the most degraded sinner as tenderly as when he was an innocent babe, and will never withdraw his call to repentance and healing, I can believe; but that the man will ever turn to God, and crucify his self-will at last, I may hope, but cannot know. The righteous and the wicked pass alike from our view into the eternal world; the wicked to receive the lot which they have obstinately chosen, a lot whose mystery of shame only eternity can declare; the righteous, to inherit a kingdom transcending all earthly thrones, and whose glories only angel voices may sing.



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